Aircel
#1 • $2.95/$3.50 in Canada
A
Adults Only

PETER HSU

THE GAUNTLET™

Peter Hsu's
Gauntlet

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GAUNTLET #1 • SEPTEMBER 1992

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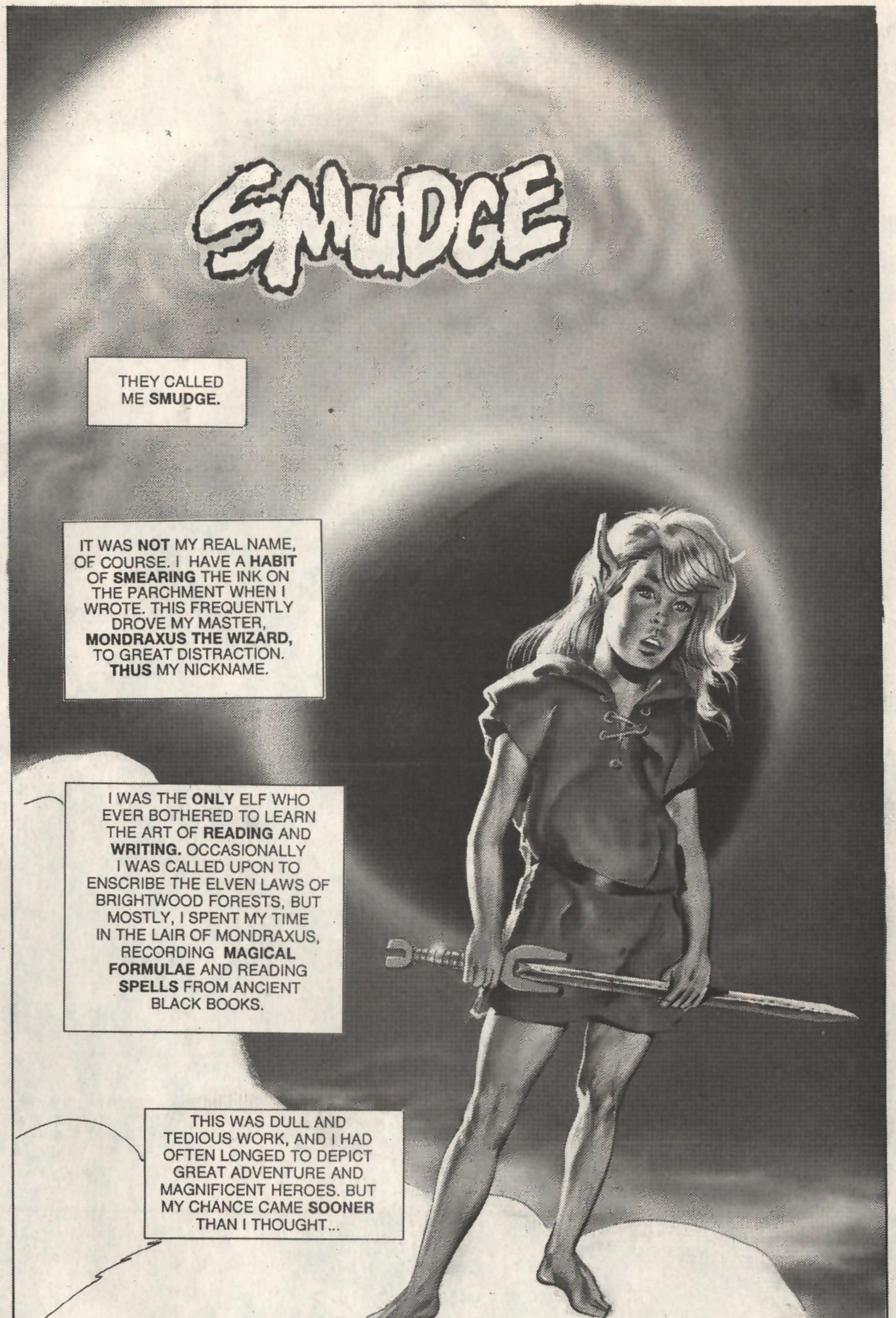
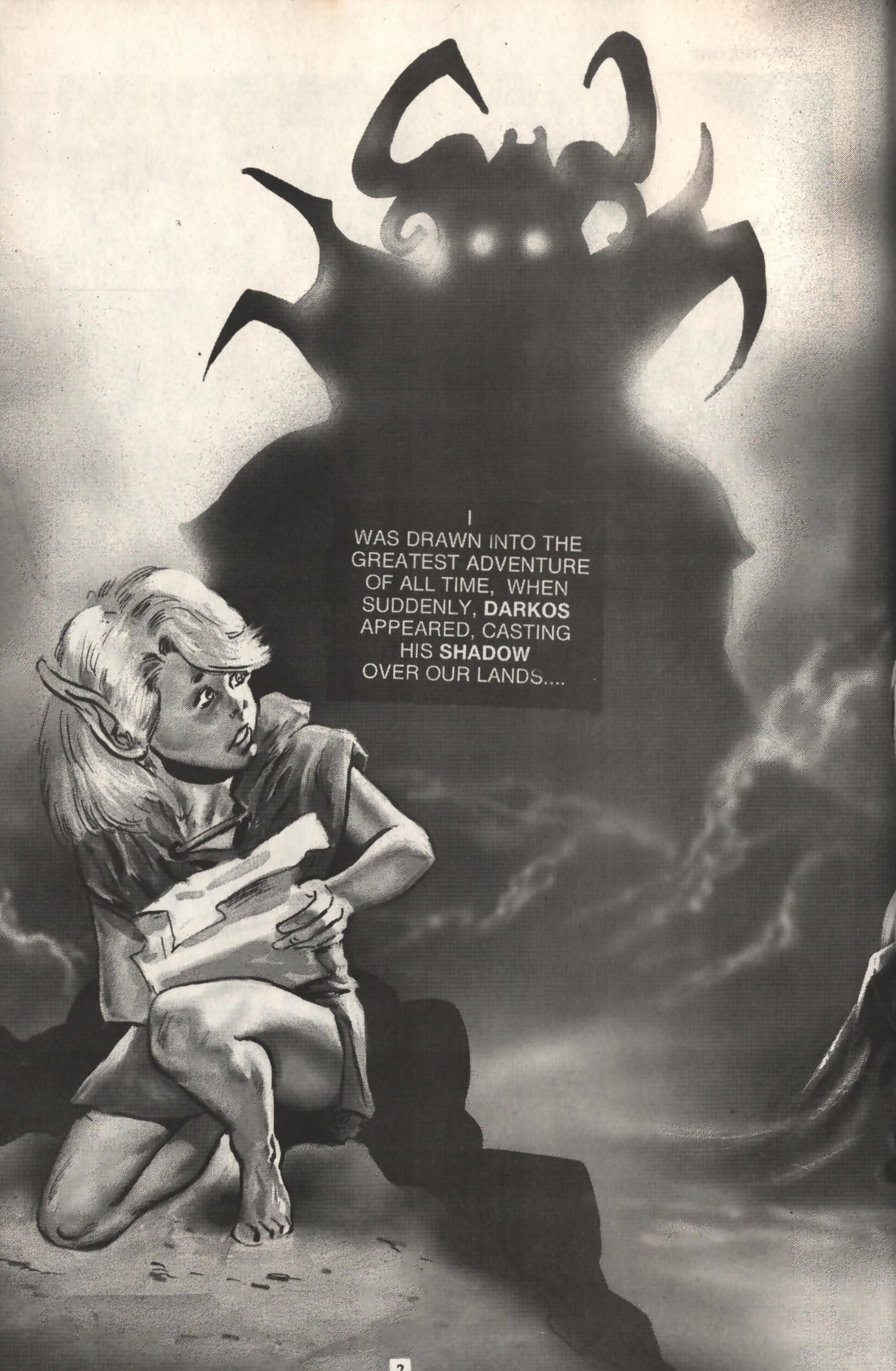
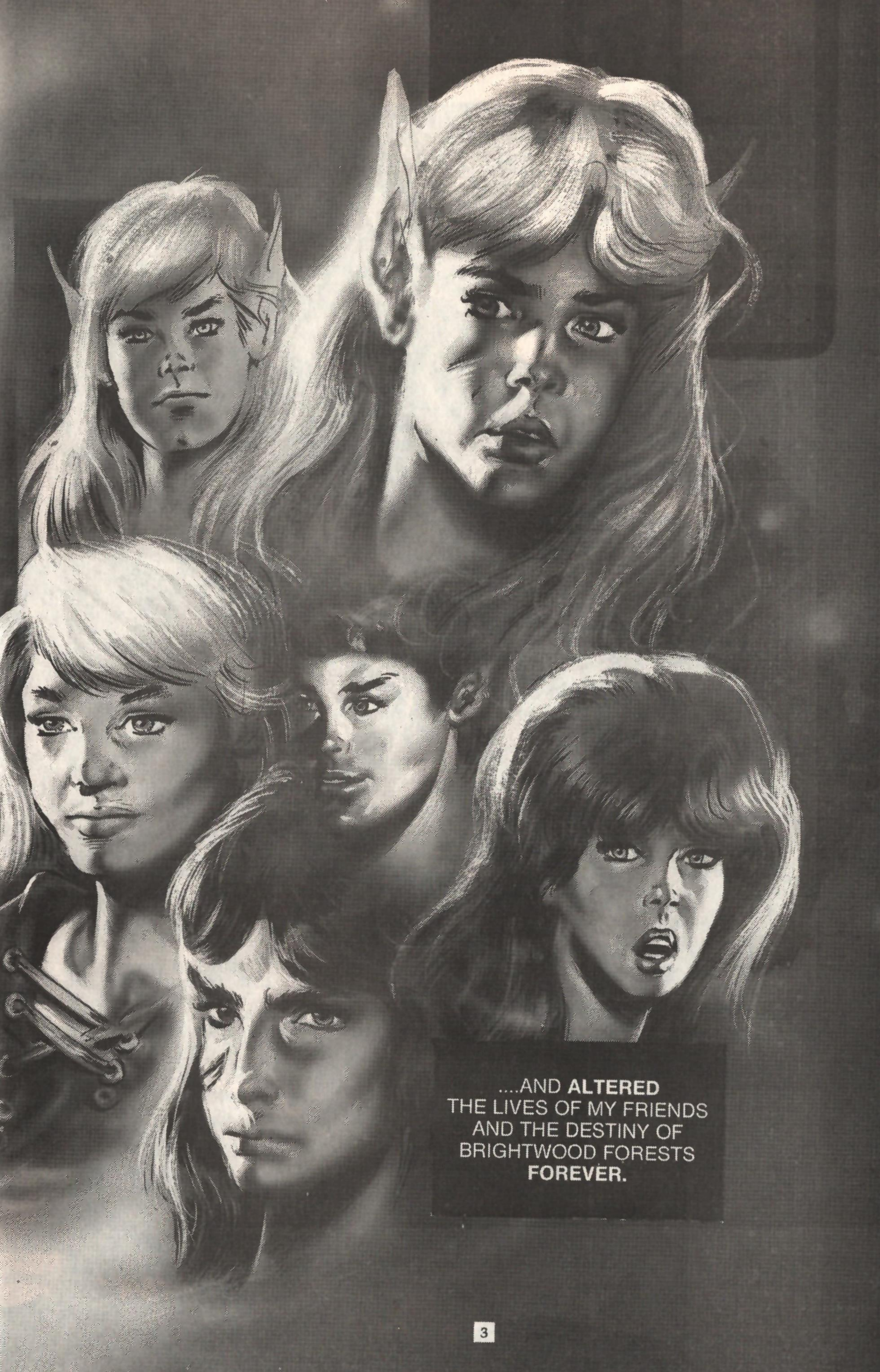
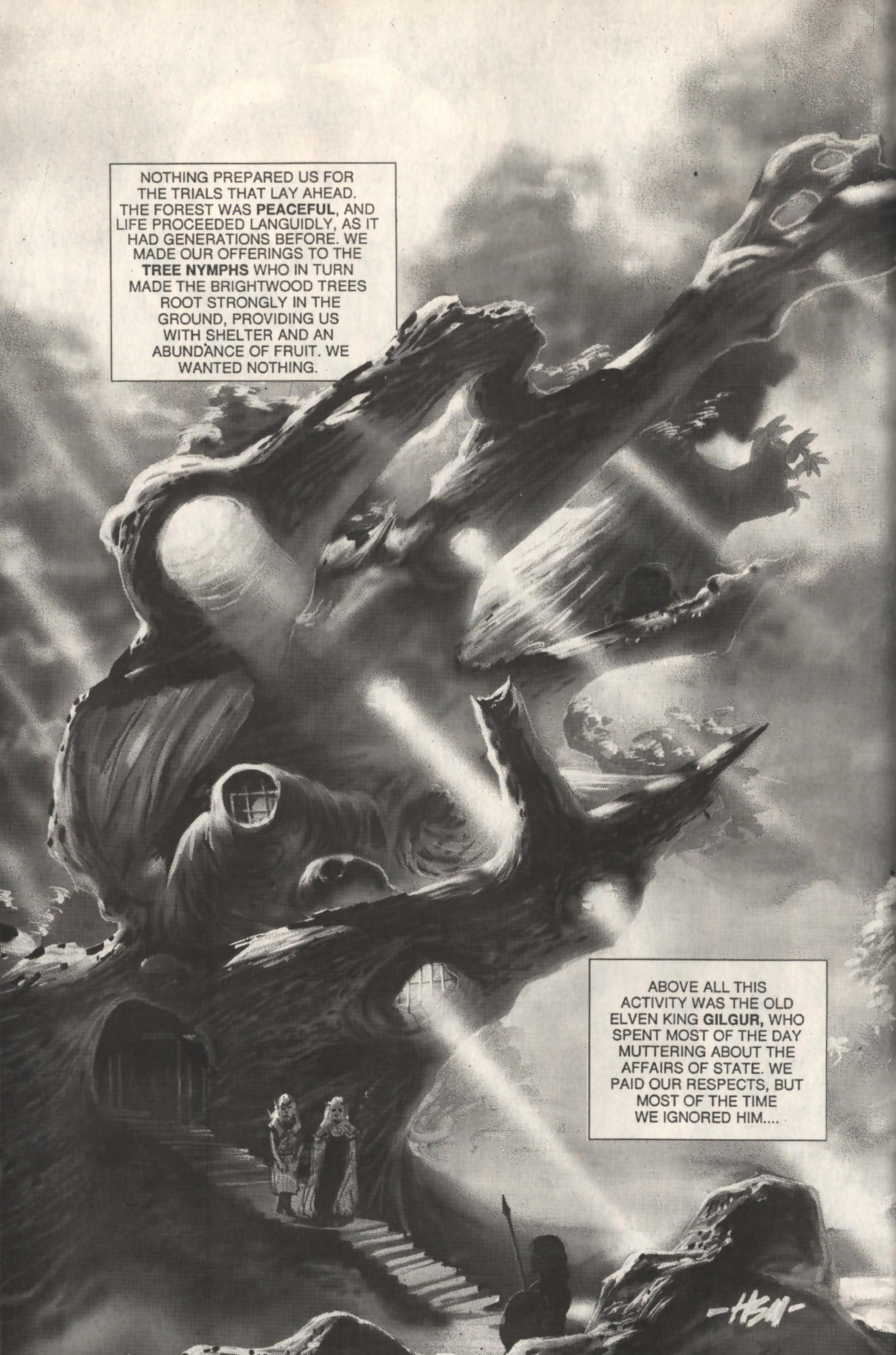
CHAPTER ONE

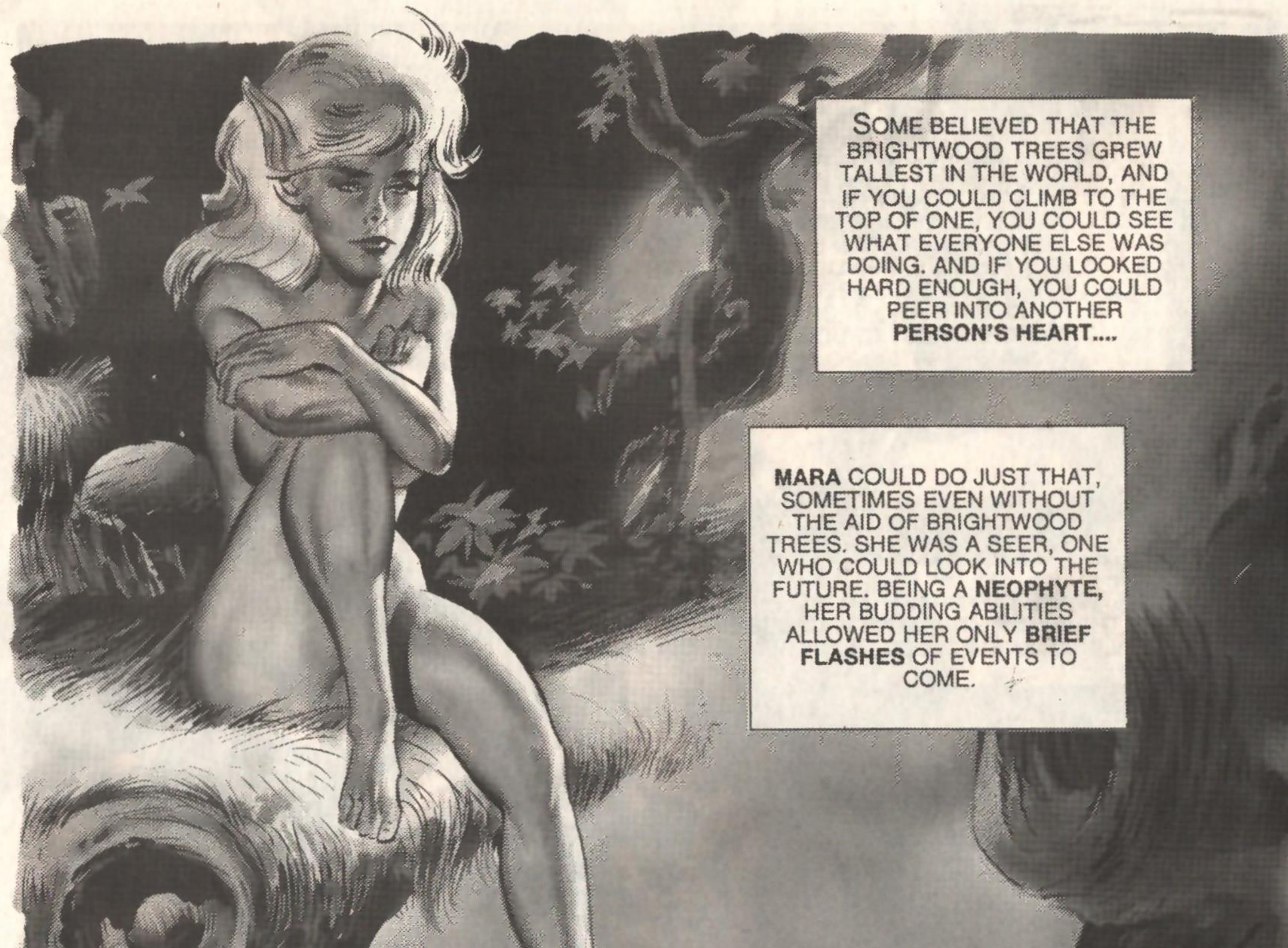

SMUDGE
THEY CALLED ME SMUDGE.
IT WAS NOT MY REAL NAME, OF COURSE. I HAVE A HABIT OF SMEARING THE INK ON THE PARCHMENT WHEN I WROTE. THIS FREQUENTLY DROVE MY MASTER, MONDRAXUS THE WIZARD, TO GREAT DISTRACTION. THUS MY NICKNAME.
I WAS THE ONLY ELF WHO EVER BOTHERED TO LEARN THE ART OF READING AND WRITING. OCCASIONALLY I WAS CALLED UPON TO ENSCRIBE THE ELVEN LAWS OF BRIGHTWOOD FORESTS, BUT MOSTLY, I SPENT MY TIME IN THE LAIR OF MONDRAXUS, RECORDING MAGICAL FORMULAE AND READING SPELLS FROM ANCIENT BLACK BOOKS.
THIS WAS DULL AND TEDIOUS WORK, AND I HAD OFTEN LONGED TO DEPICT GREAT ADVENTURE AND MAGNIFICENT HEROES. BUT MY CHANCE CAME SOONER THAN I THOUGHT...

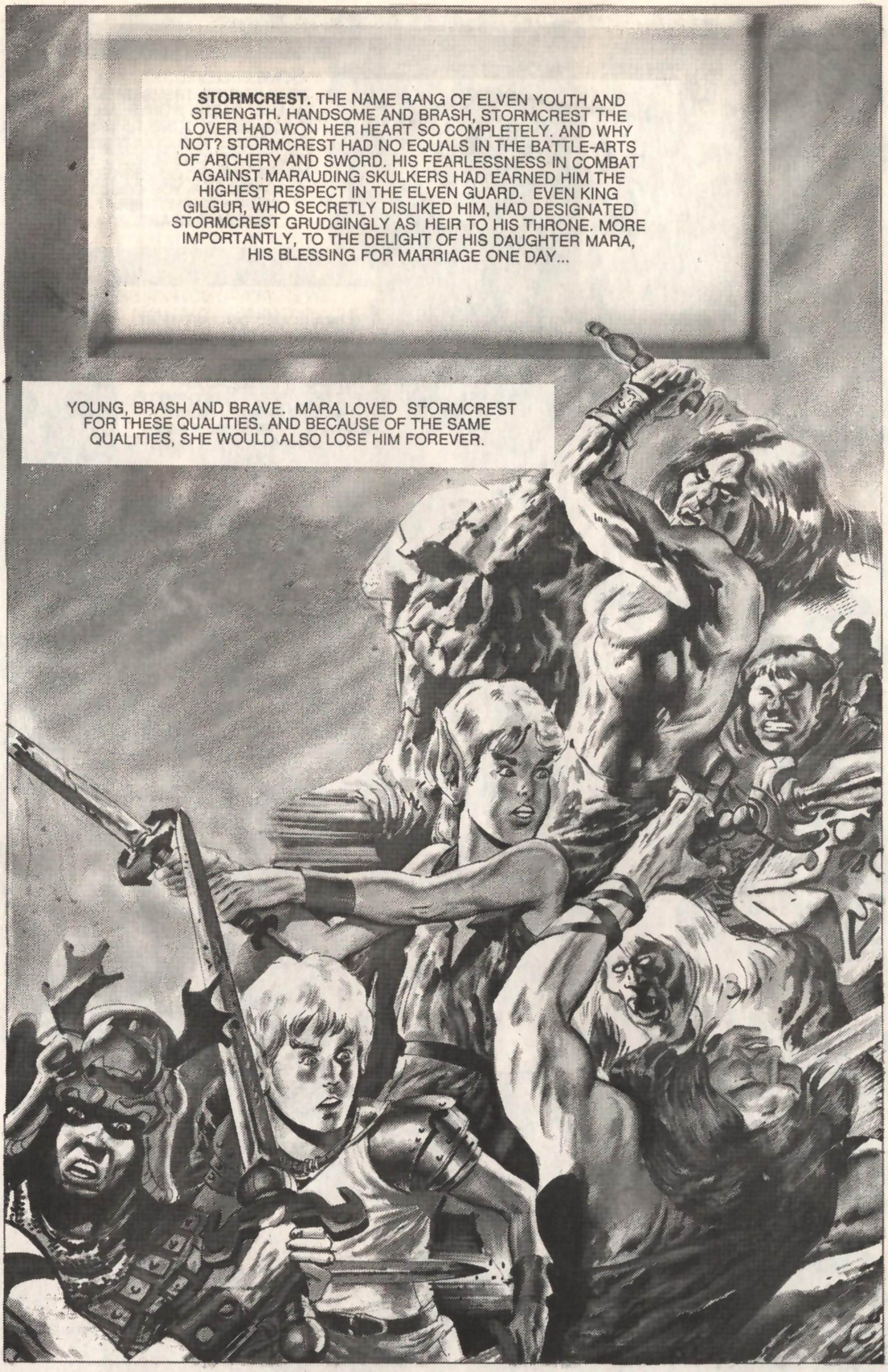

I WAS DRAWN INTO THE GREATEST ADVENTURE OF ALL TIME, WHEN SUDDENLY, **DARKOS** APPEARED, CASTING HIS **SHADOW** OVER OUR LANDS....



....AND **ALTERED** THE LIVES OF MY FRIENDS AND THE DESTINY OF BRIGHTWOOD FORESTS **FOREVER.**

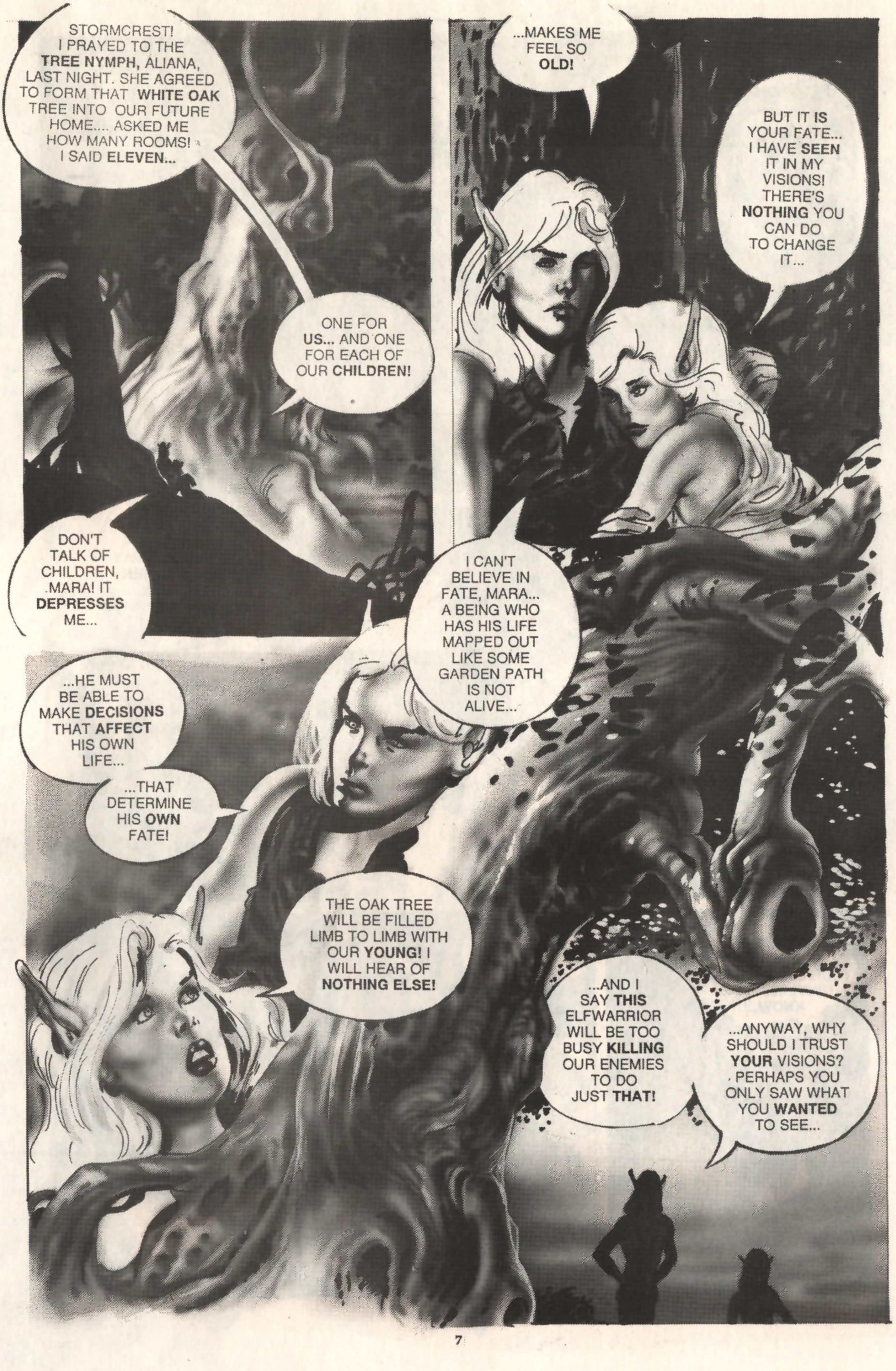

NOTHING PREPARED US FOR THE TRIALS THAT LAY AHEAD. THE FOREST WAS **PEACEFUL**, AND LIFE PROCEEDED LANGUIDLY, AS IT HAD GENERATIONS BEFORE. WE MADE OUR OFFERINGS TO THE **TREE NYMPHS** WHO IN TURN MADE THE BRIGHTWOOD TREES ROOT STRONGLY IN THE GROUND, PROVIDING US WITH SHELTER AND AN ABUNDANCE OF FRUIT. WE WANTED NOTHING.
ABOVE ALL THIS ACTIVITY WAS THE OLD ELVEN KING **GILGUR,** WHO SPENT MOST OF THE DAY MUTTERING ABOUT THE AFFAIRS OF STATE. WE PAID OUR RESPECTS, BUT MOST OF THE TIME WE IGNORED HIM....

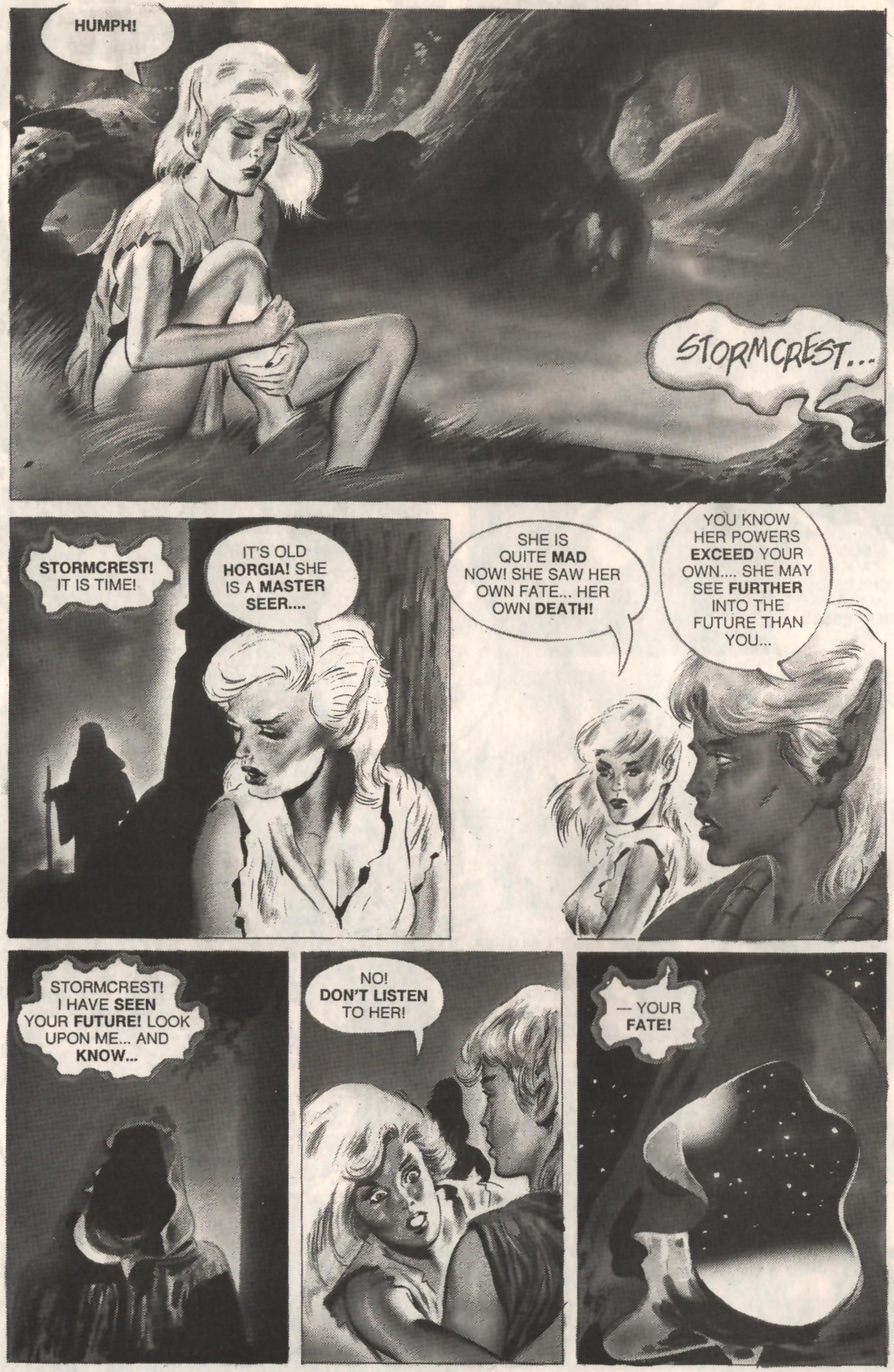

SOME BELIEVED THAT THE BRIGHTWOOD TREES GREW TALLEST IN THE WORLD, AND IF YOU COULD CLIMB TO THE TOP OF ONE, YOU COULD SEE WHAT EVERYONE ELSE WAS DOING. AND IF YOU LOOKED HARD ENOUGH, YOU COULD PEER INTO ANOTHER **PERSON'S HEART....**
MARA COULD DO JUST THAT, SOMETIMES EVEN WITHOUT THE AID OF BRIGHTWOOD TREES. SHE WAS A SEER, ONE WHO COULD LOOK INTO THE FUTURE. BEING A **NEOPHYTE,** HER BUDDING ABILITIES ALLOWED HER ONLY **BRIEF FLASHES** OF EVENTS TO COME.
MOST OF THE TIME, HOWEVER, MARA JUST SAT AND **BROODED,** AND WAITED FOR HER BELOVED **STORMCREST.**

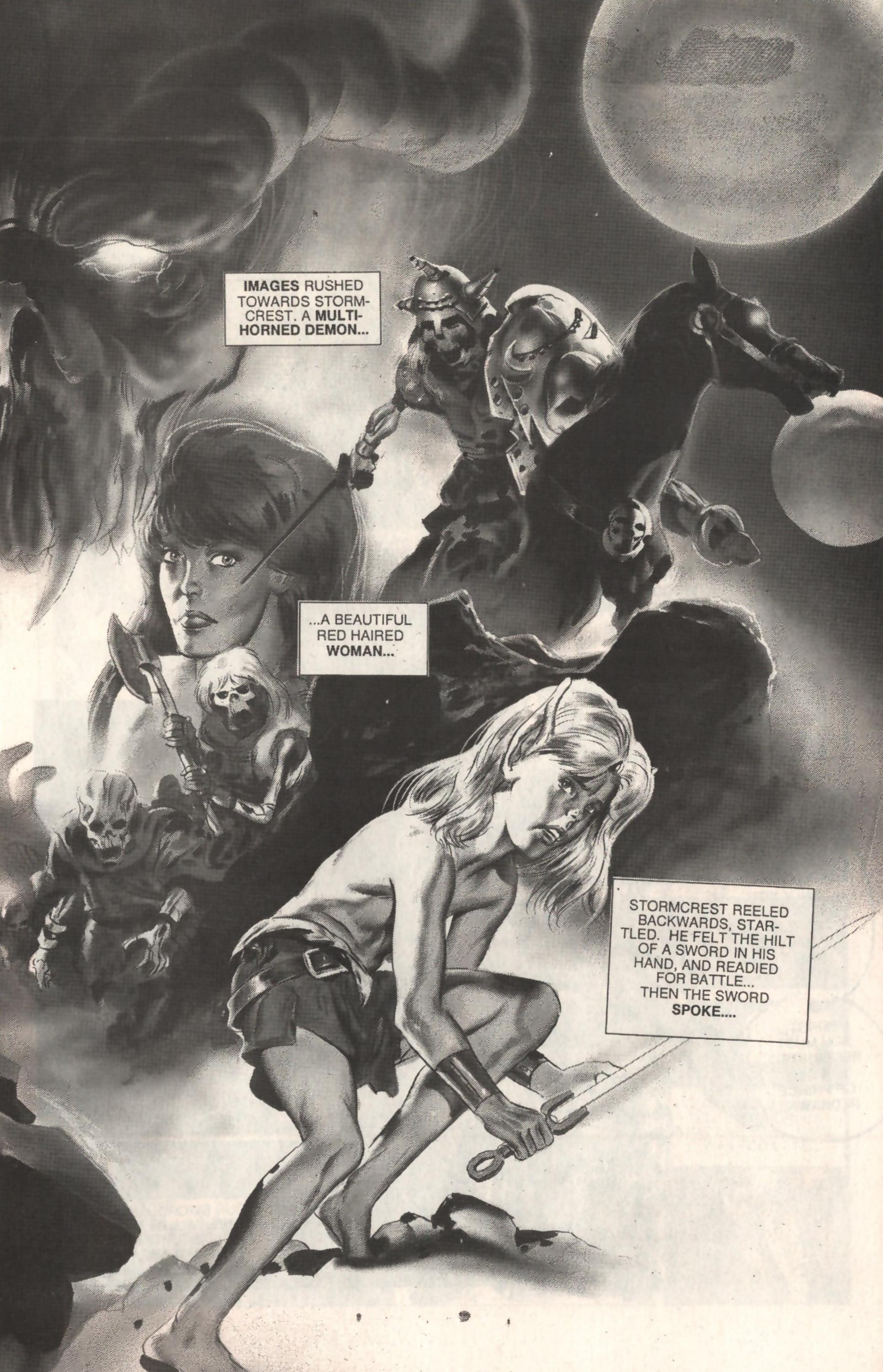


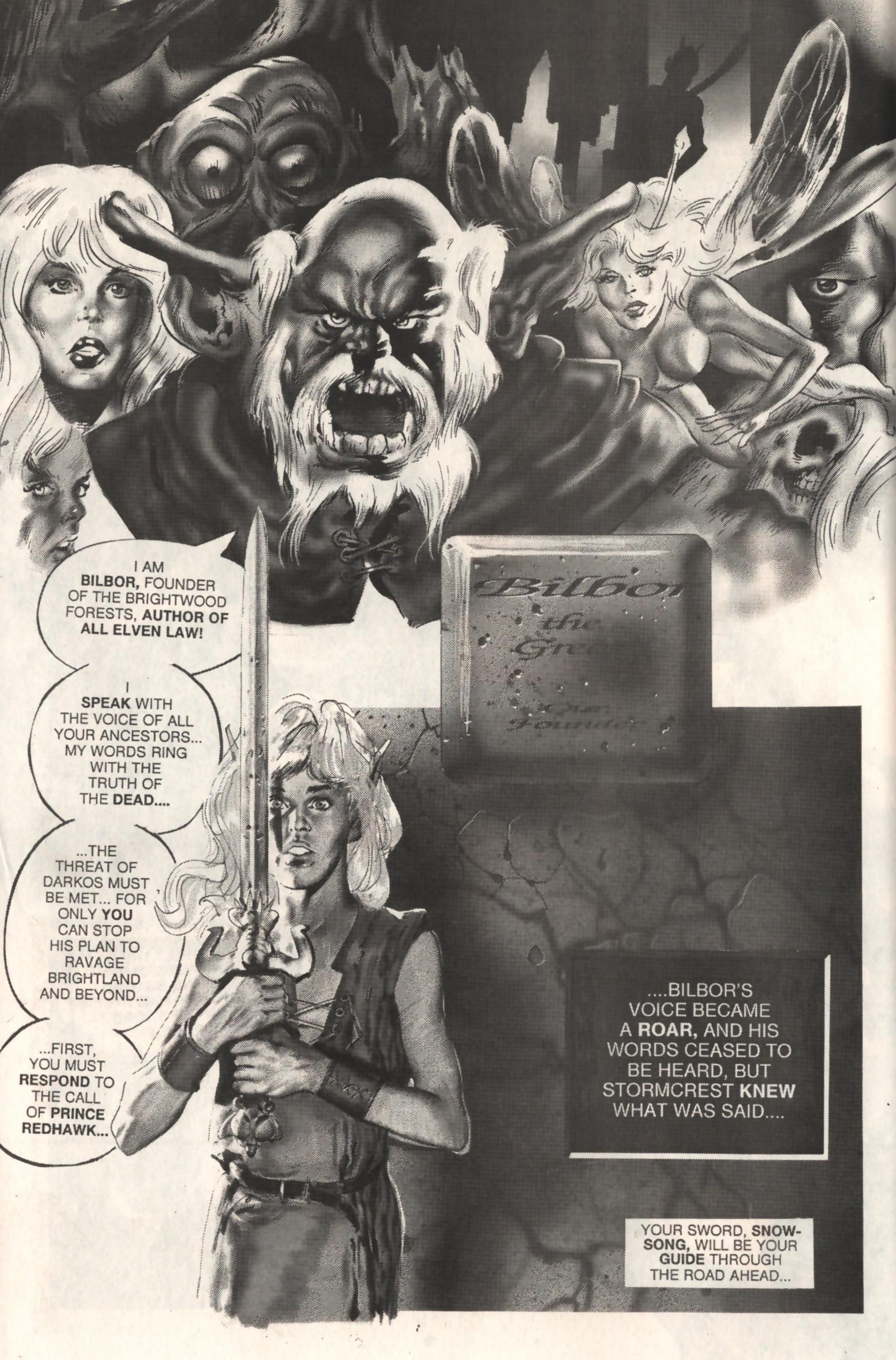
STORMCREST. THE NAME RANG OF ELVEN YOUTH AND STRENGTH. HANDSOME AND BRASH, STORMCREST THE LOVER HAD WON HER HEART SO COMPLETELY. AND WHY NOT? STORMCREST HAD NO EQUALS IN THE BATTLE-ARTS OF ARCHERY AND SWORD. HIS FEARLESSNESS IN COMBAT AGAINST MARAUDING SKULKERS HAD EARNED HIM THE HIGHEST RESPECT IN THE ELVEN GUARD. EVEN KING GILGUR, WHO SECRETLY DISLIKED HIM, HAD DESIGNATED STORMCREST GRUDGINGLY AS HEIR TO HIS THRONE. MORE IMPORTANTLY, TO THE DELIGHT OF HIS DAUGHTER MARA, HIS BLESSING FOR MARRIAGE ONE DAY...

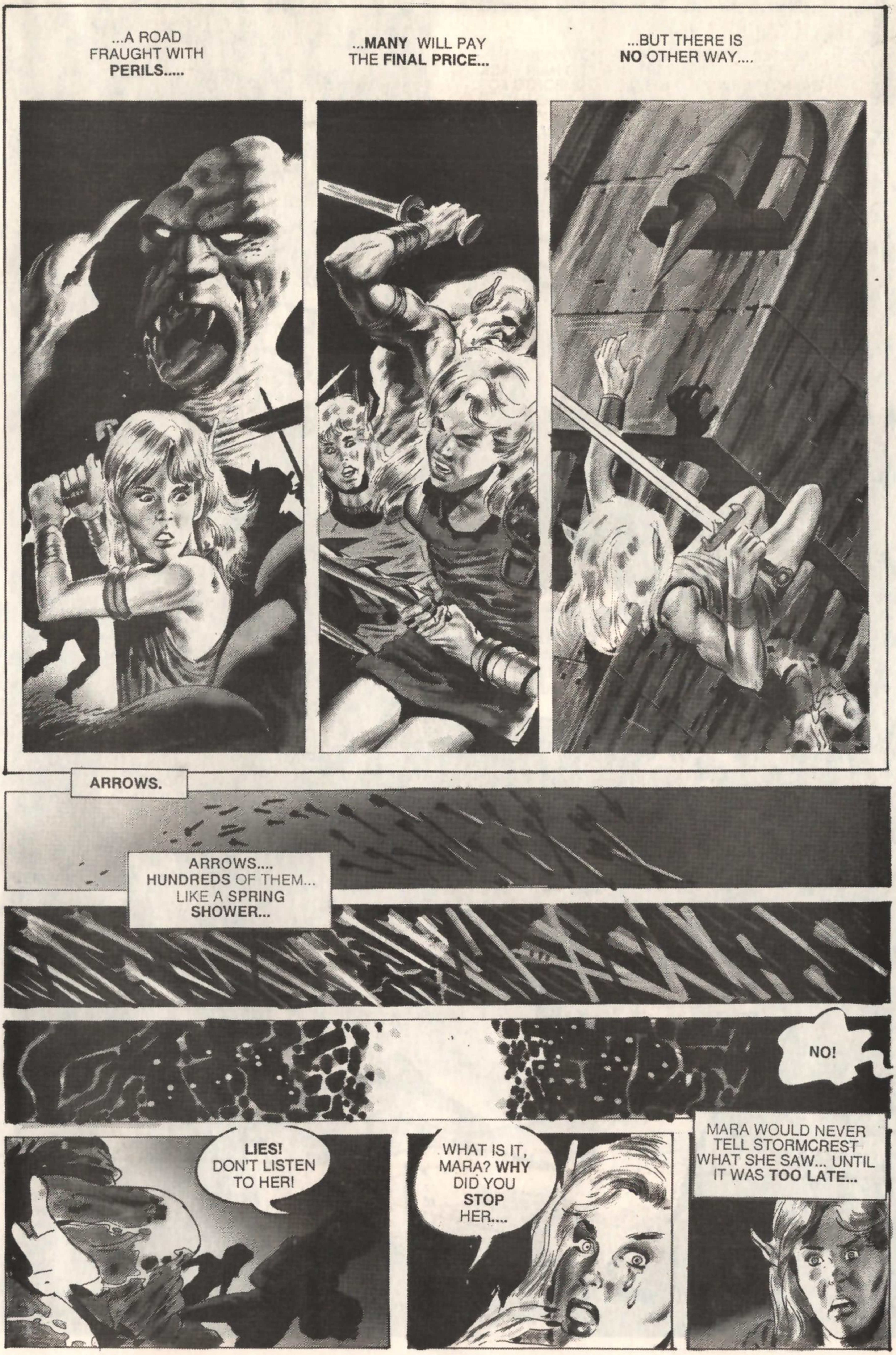
YOUNG, BRASH AND BRAVE. MARA LOVED STORMCREST FOR THESE QUALITIES. AND BECAUSE OF THE SAME QUALITIES, SHE WOULD ALSO LOSE HIM FOREVER.


STORMCREST! I PRAYED TO THE TREE NYMPH, ALIANA, LAST NIGHT. SHE AGREED TO FORM THAT WHITE OAK TREE INTO OUR FUTURE HOME.... ASKED ME HOW MANY ROOMS! I SAID ELEVEN...
ONE FOR US... AND ONE FOR EACH OF OUR CHILDREN!
DON'T TALK OF CHILDREN, MARA! IT DEPRESSES ME...
...MAKES ME FEEL SO OLD!
BUT IT IS YOUR FATE... I HAVE SEEN IT IN MY VISIONS! THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO TO CHANGE IT...
I CAN'T BELIEVE IN FATE, MARA... A BEING WHO HAS HIS LIFE MAPPED OUT LIKE SOME GARDEN PATH IS NOT ALIVE...
...HE MUST BE ABLE TO MAKE DECISIONS THAT AFFECT HIS OWN LIFE...
...THAT DETERMINE HIS OWN FATE!
THE OAK TREE WILL BE FILLED LIMB TO LIMB WITH OUR YOUNG! I WILL HEAR OF NOTHING ELSE!
...AND I SAY THIS ELFWARRIOR WILL BE TOO BUSY KILLING OUR ENEMIES TO DO JUST THAT!
...ANYWAY, WHY SHOULD I TRUST YOUR VISIONS? PERHAPS YOU ONLY SAW WHAT YOU WANTED TO SEE...

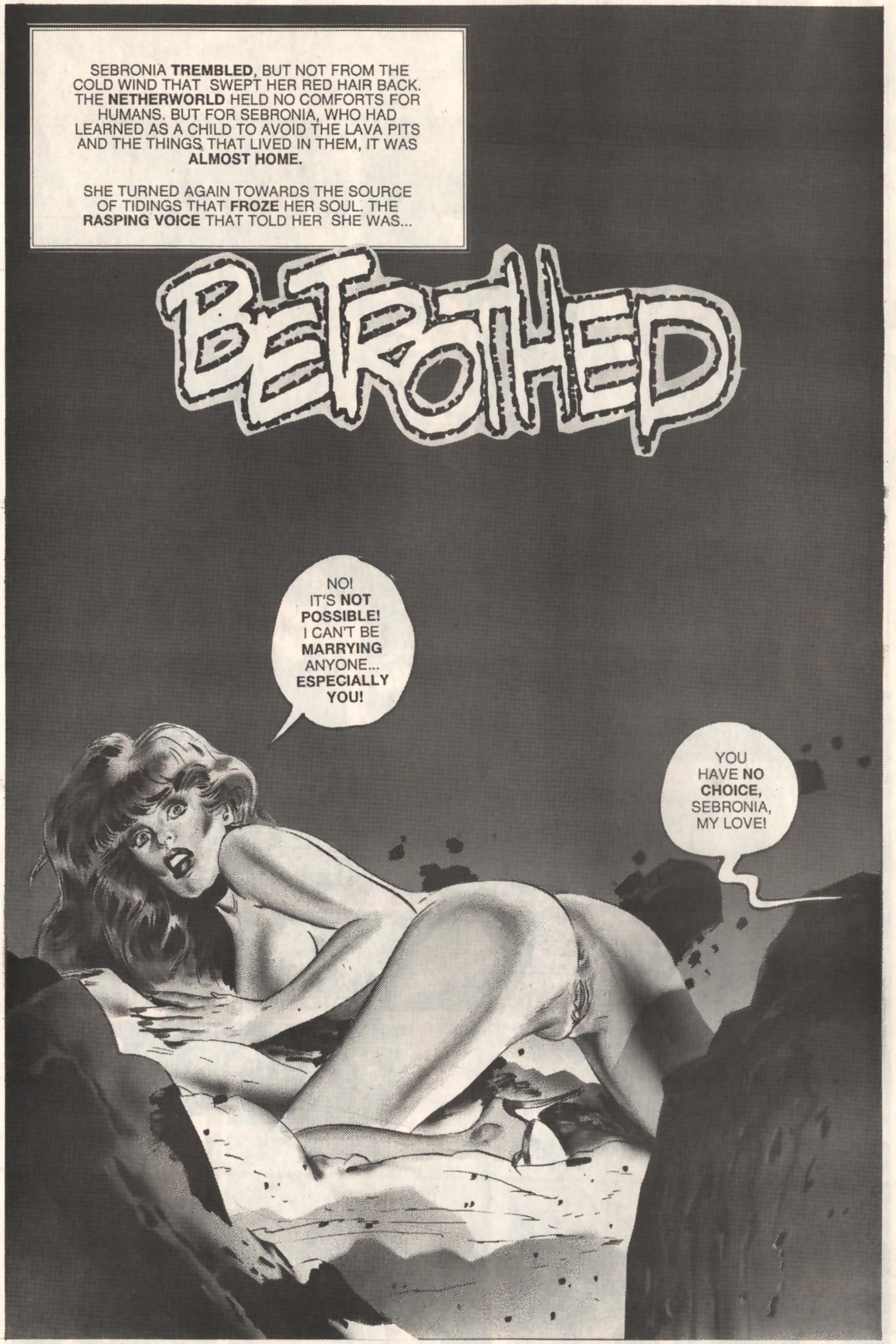

HUMPH!
STORMCREST...
STORMCREST! IT IS TIME!
IT'S OLD HORGIA! SHE IS A MASTER SEER....
SHE IS QUITE MAD NOW! SHE SAW HER OWN FATE... HER OWN DEATH!
YOU KNOW HER POWERS EXCEED YOUR OWN.... SHE MAY SEE FURTHER INTO THE FUTURE THAN YOU...
STORMCREST! I HAVE SEEN YOUR FUTURE! LOOK UPON ME... AND KNOW...
NO! DON'T LISTEN TO HER!
— YOUR FATE!

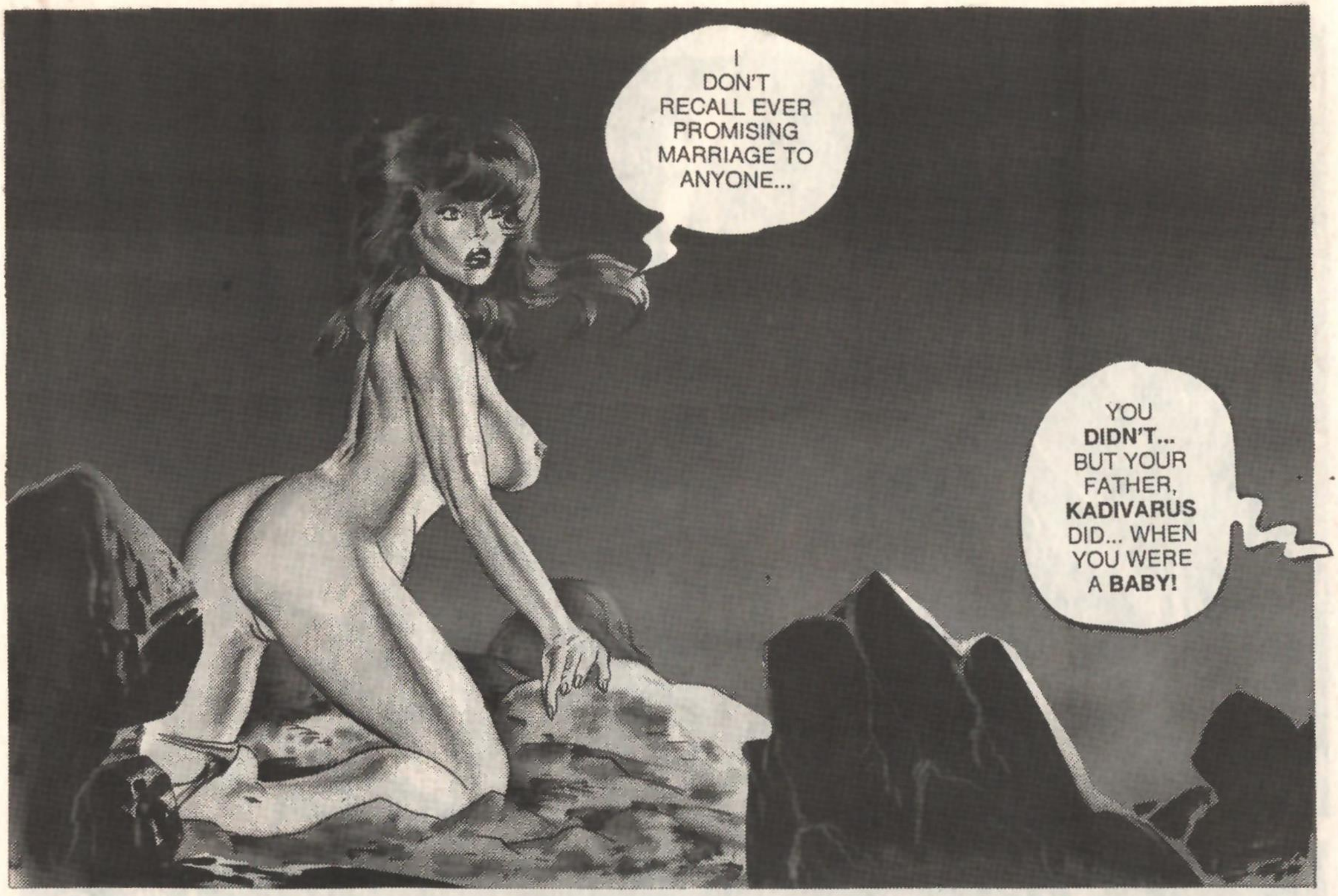

IMAGES RUSHED TOWARDS STORMCREST. A **MULTI-HORNED DEMON...**
...A BEAUTIFUL RED HAIRED **WOMAN...**
STORMCREST REELED BACKWARDS, STARTLED. HE FELT THE HILT OF A SWORD IN HIS HAND, AND READIED FOR BATTLE... THEN THE SWORD **SPOKE....**

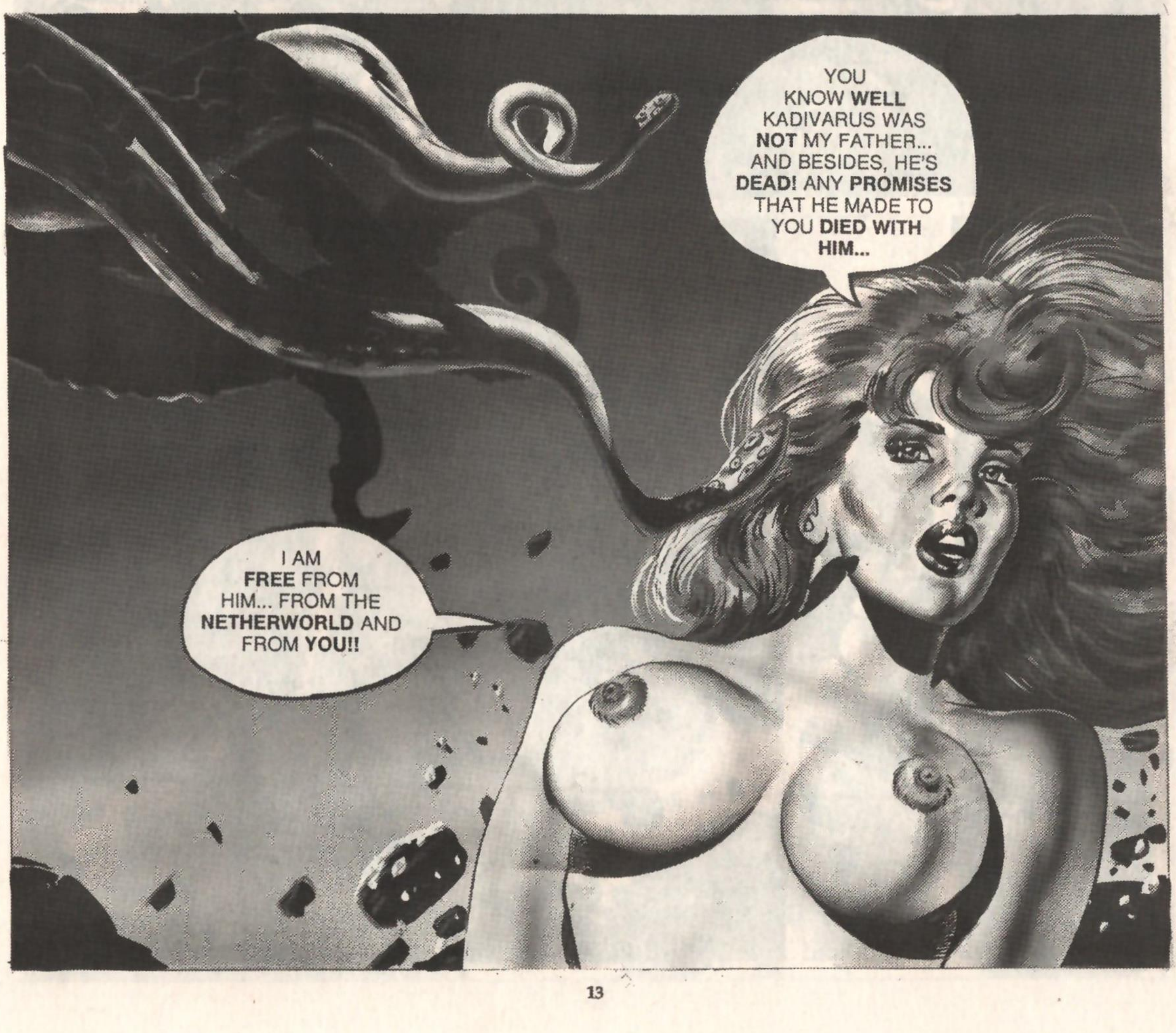

I AM **BILBOR,** FOUNDER OF THE BRIGHTWOOD FORESTS, **AUTHOR OF ALL ELVEN LAW!**
I **SPEAK** WITH THE VOICE OF ALL YOUR ANCESTORS... MY WORDS RING WITH THE TRUTH OF THE **DEAD....**
...THE THREAT OF DARKOS MUST BE MET... FOR ONLY **YOU** CAN STOP HIS PLAN TO RAVAGE BRIGHTLAND AND BEYOND...
...FIRST, YOU MUST **RESPOND** TO THE CALL OF **PRINCE REDHAWK...**
Bilbor
the
Gre
Founder
....BILBOR'S VOICE BECAME A **ROAR,** AND HIS WORDS CEASED TO BE HEARD, BUT STORMCREST **KNEW** WHAT WAS SAID....
YOUR SWORD, **SNOWSONG,** WILL BE YOUR **GUIDE** THROUGH THE ROAD AHEAD...

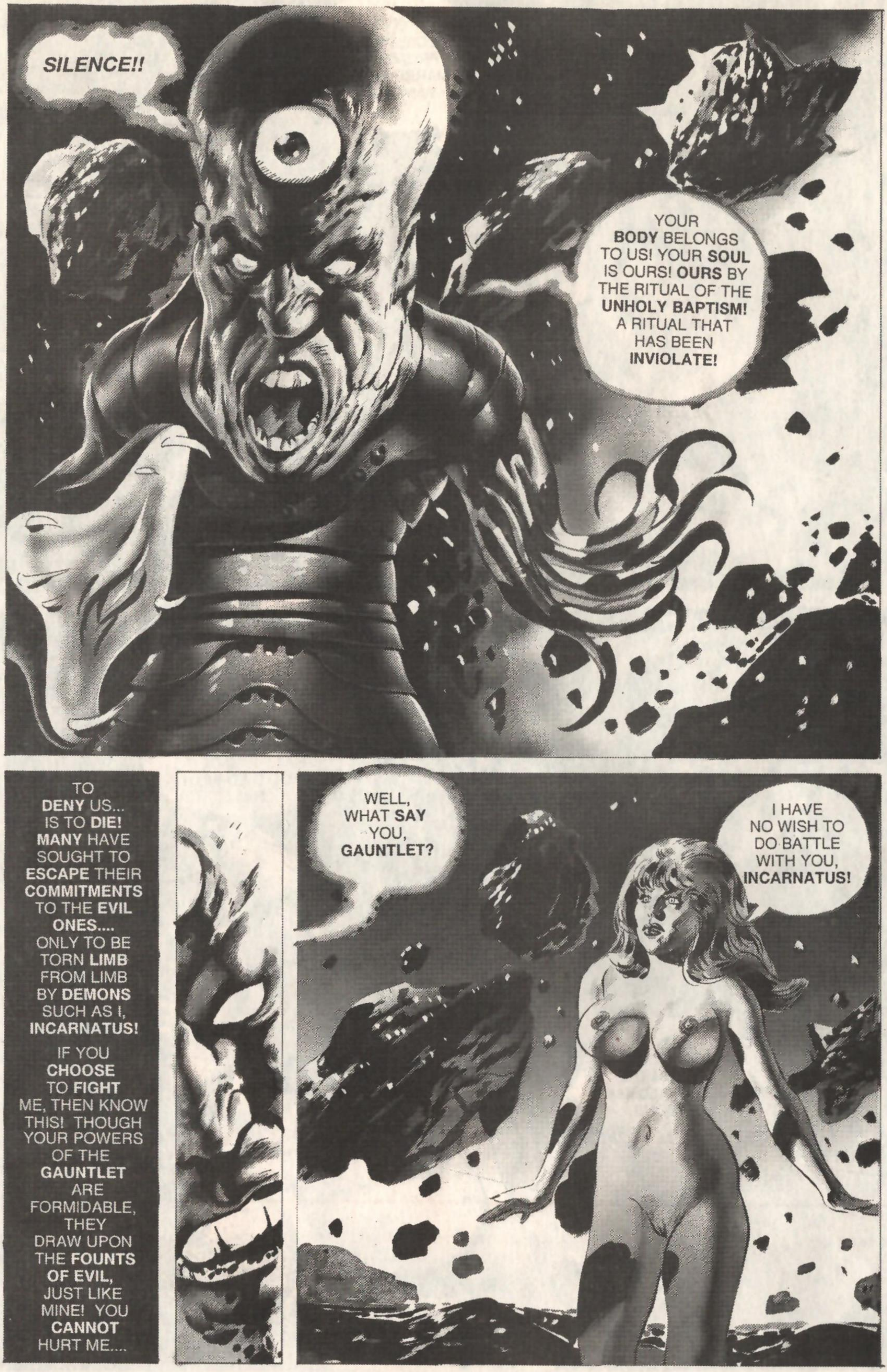

...A ROAD FRAUGHT WITH **PERILS.....**
...**MANY** WILL PAY THE **FINAL PRICE...**
...BUT THERE IS **NO** OTHER WAY....
ARROWS.
ARROWS.... **HUNDREDS** OF THEM... LIKE A **SPRING SHOWER...**
NO!
LIES! DON'T LISTEN TO HER!
WHAT IS IT, MARA? **WHY** DID YOU **STOP** HER....
MARA WOULD NEVER TELL STORMCREST WHAT SHE SAW... UNTIL IT WAS **TOO LATE...**

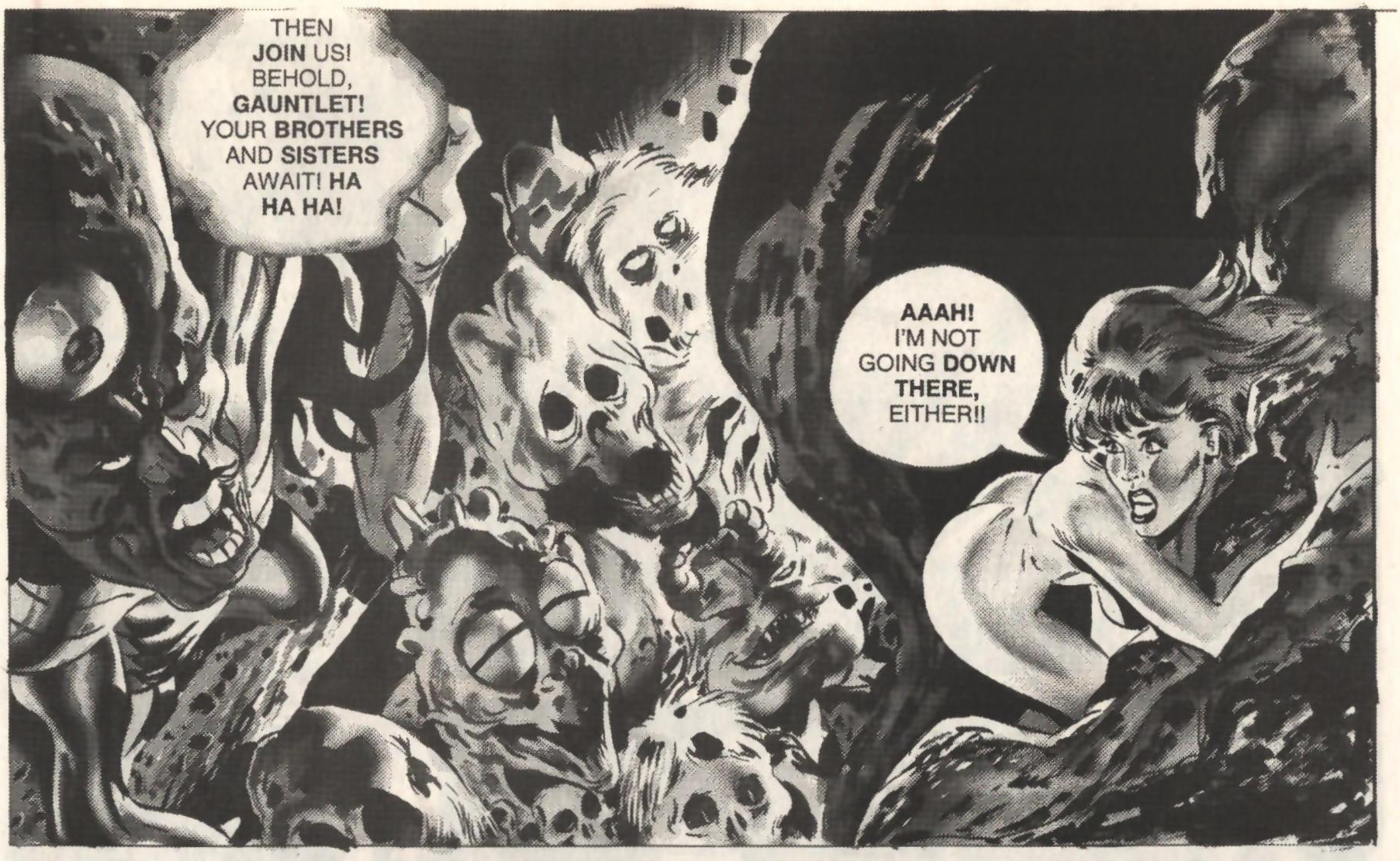
CHAPTER TWO

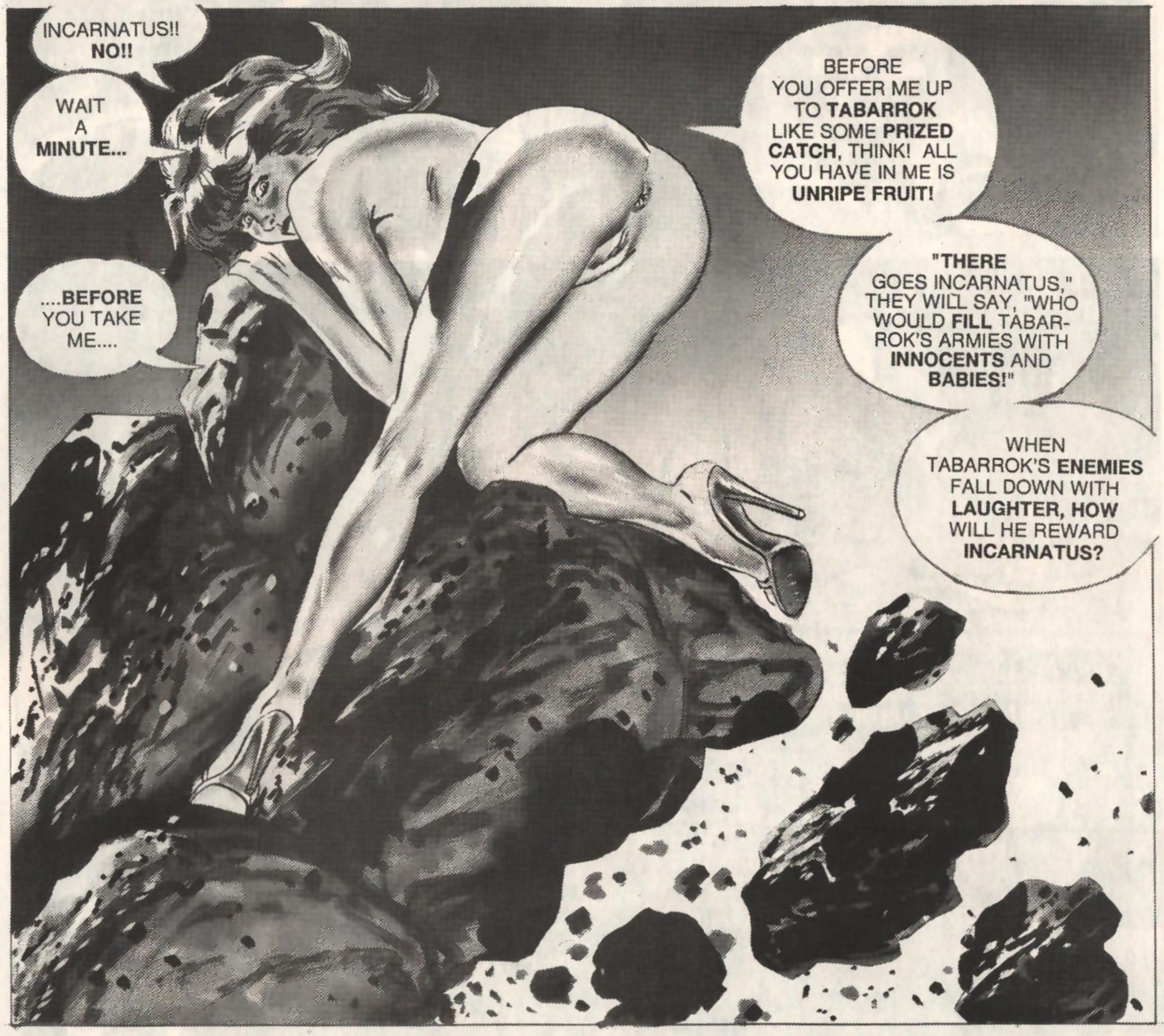

SEBRONIA **TREMBLED**, BUT NOT FROM THE COLD WIND THAT SWEPT HER RED HAIR BACK. THE **NETHERWORLD** HELD NO COMFORTS FOR HUMANS. BUT FOR SEBRONIA, WHO HAD LEARNED AS A CHILD TO AVOID THE LAVA PITS AND THE THINGS THAT LIVED IN THEM, IT WAS **ALMOST HOME.**
SHE TURNED AGAIN TOWARDS THE SOURCE OF TIDINGS THAT **FROZE** HER SOUL. THE **RASPING VOICE** THAT TOLD HER SHE WAS...
BETROTHED
NO! IT'S **NOT POSSIBLE!** I CAN'T BE **MARRYING** ANYONE... **ESPECIALLY YOU!**
YOU HAVE **NO CHOICE,** SEBRONIA, MY LOVE!

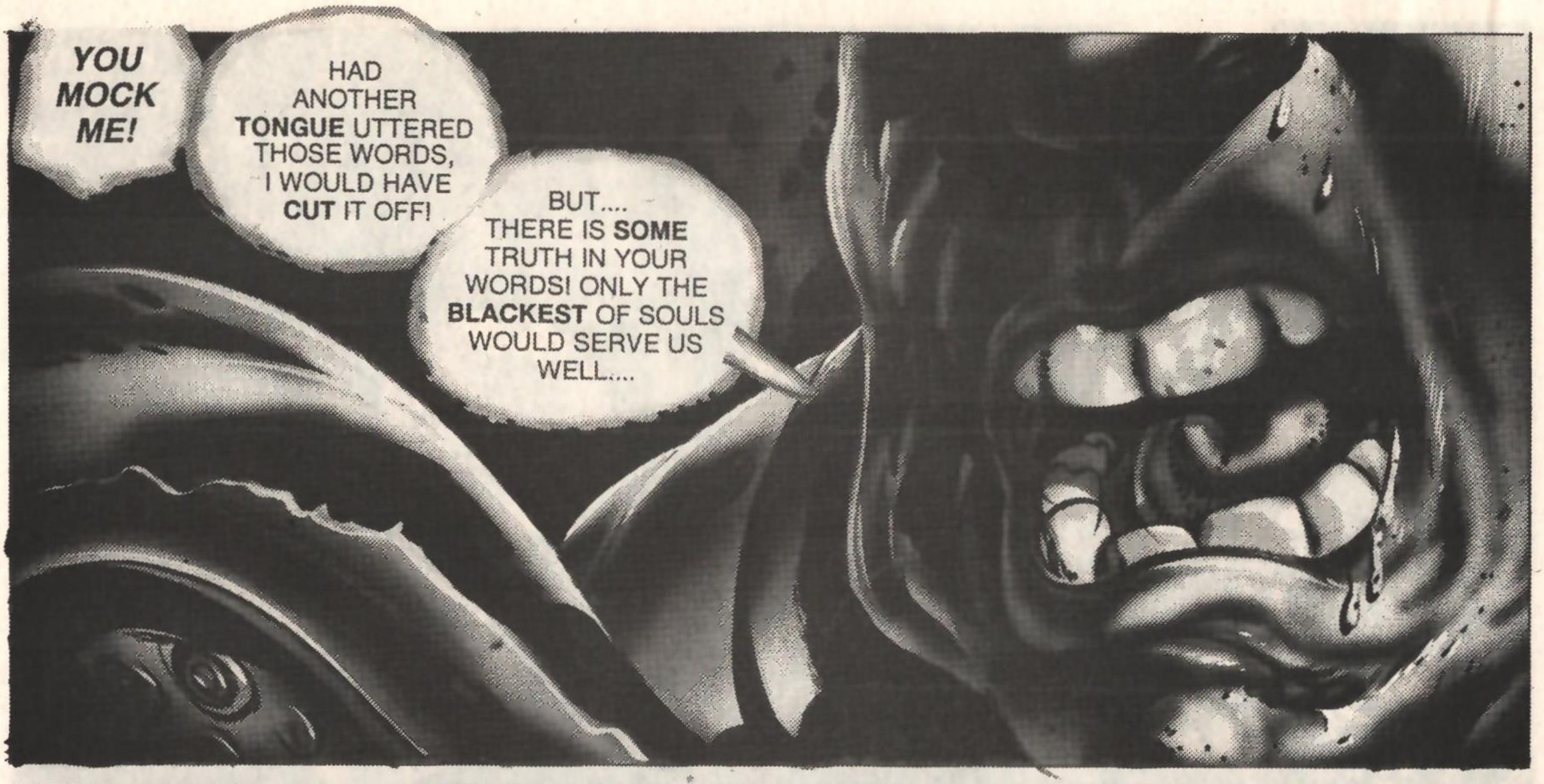

I DON'T RECALL EVER PROMISING MARRIAGE TO ANYONE...
YOU **DIDN'T...** BUT YOUR FATHER, **KADIVARUS** DID... WHEN YOU WERE A **BABY!**

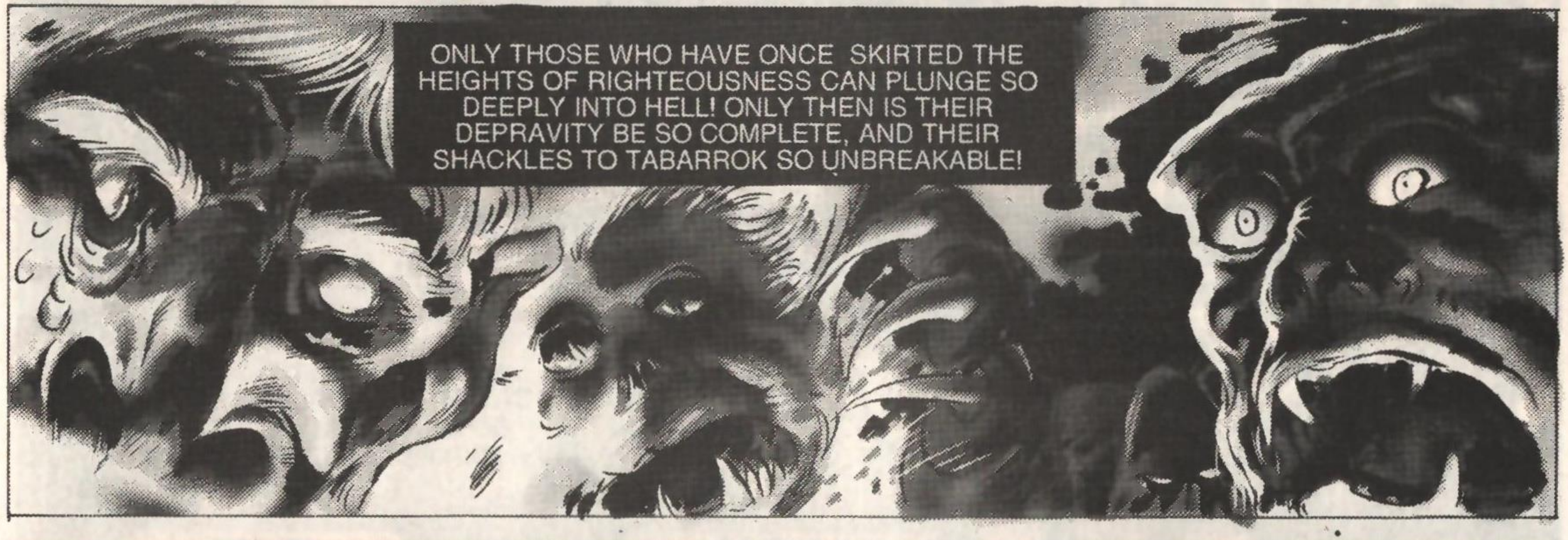

YOU KNOW **WELL** KADIVARUS WAS **NOT** MY FATHER... AND BESIDES, HE'S **DEAD!** ANY **PROMISES** THAT HE MADE TO YOU **DIED WITH HIM...**
I AM **FREE** FROM HIM... FROM THE **NETHERWORLD** AND FROM **YOU!!**

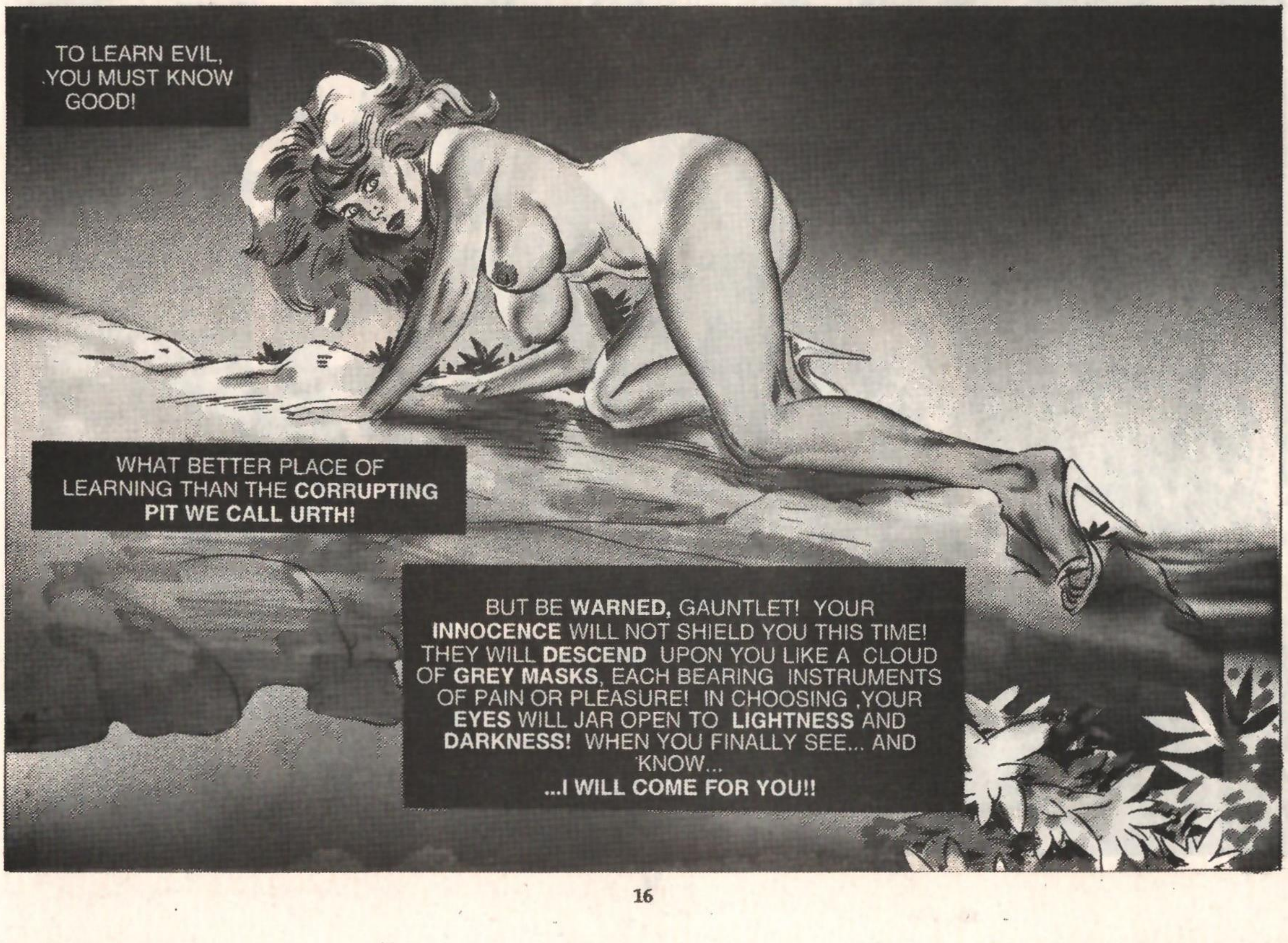

SILENCE!!
YOUR BODY BELONGS TO US! YOUR SOUL IS OURS! OURS BY THE RITUAL OF THE UNHOLY BAPTISM! A RITUAL THAT HAS BEEN INVIOLATE!
TO DENY US... IS TO DIE! MANY HAVE SOUGHT TO ESCAPE THEIR COMMITMENTS TO THE EVIL ONES.... ONLY TO BE TORN LIMB FROM LIMB BY DEMONS SUCH AS I, INCARNATUS!
IF YOU CHOOSE TO FIGHT ME, THEN KNOW THIS! THOUGH YOUR POWERS OF THE GAUNTLET ARE FORMIDABLE, THEY DRAW UPON THE FOUNTS OF EVIL, JUST LIKE MINE! YOU CANNOT HURT ME....
WELL, WHAT SAY YOU, GAUNTLET?
I HAVE NO WISH TO DO BATTLE WITH YOU, INCARNATUS!

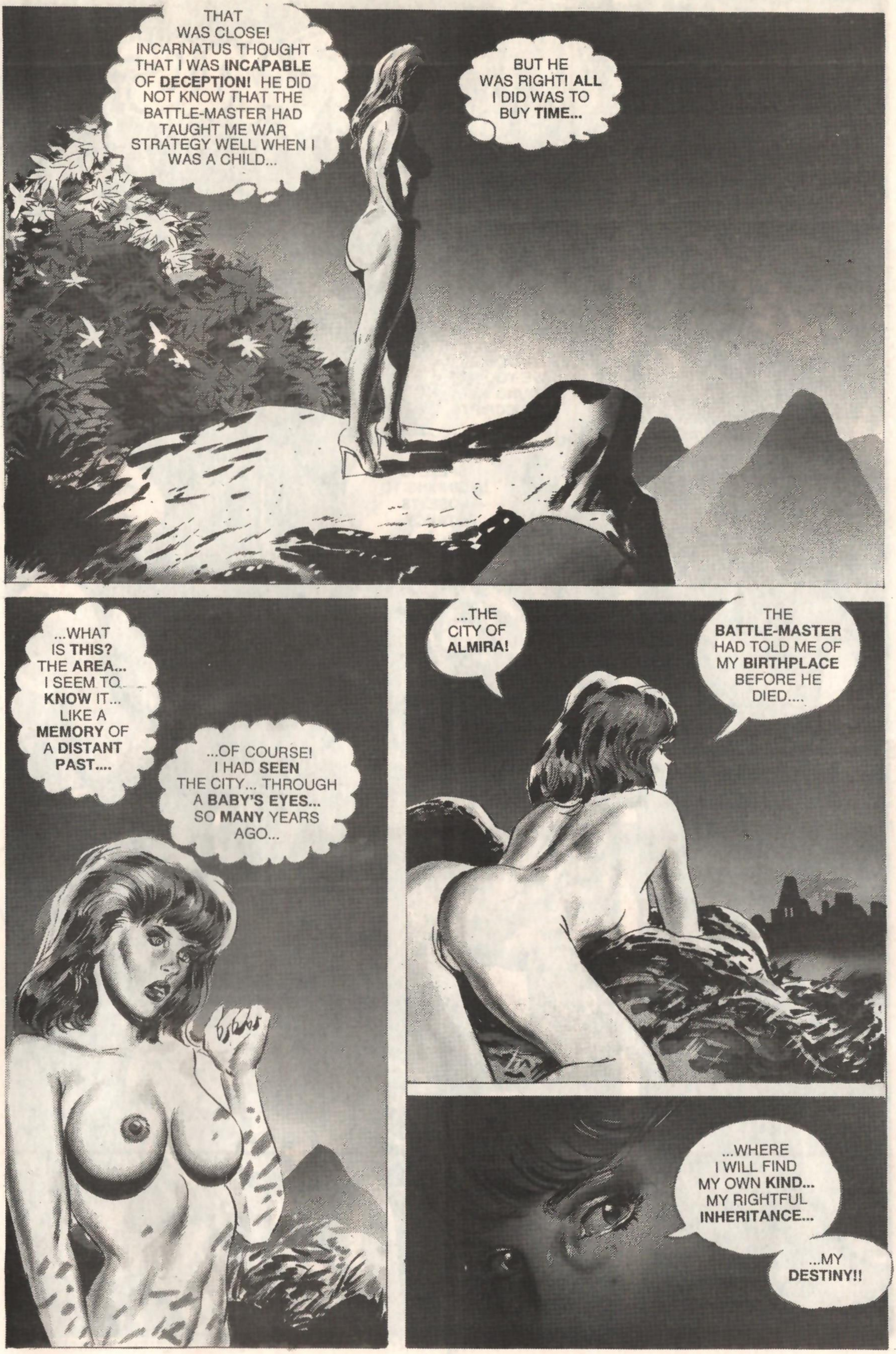

THEN JOIN US! BEHOLD, GAUNTLET! YOUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS AWAIT! HA HA HA!
AAAH! I'M NOT GOING DOWN THERE, EITHER!!


INCARNATUS!! NO!!
WAIT A MINUTE...
....BEFORE YOU TAKE ME....
BEFORE YOU OFFER ME UP TO TABARROK LIKE SOME PRIZED CATCH, THINK! ALL YOU HAVE IN ME IS UNRIPE FRUIT!
"THERE GOES INCARNATUS," THEY WILL SAY, "WHO WOULD FILL TABARROK'S ARMIES WITH INNOCENTS AND BABIES!"
WHEN TABARROK'S ENEMIES FALL DOWN WITH LAUGHTER, HOW WILL HE REWARD INCARNATUS?

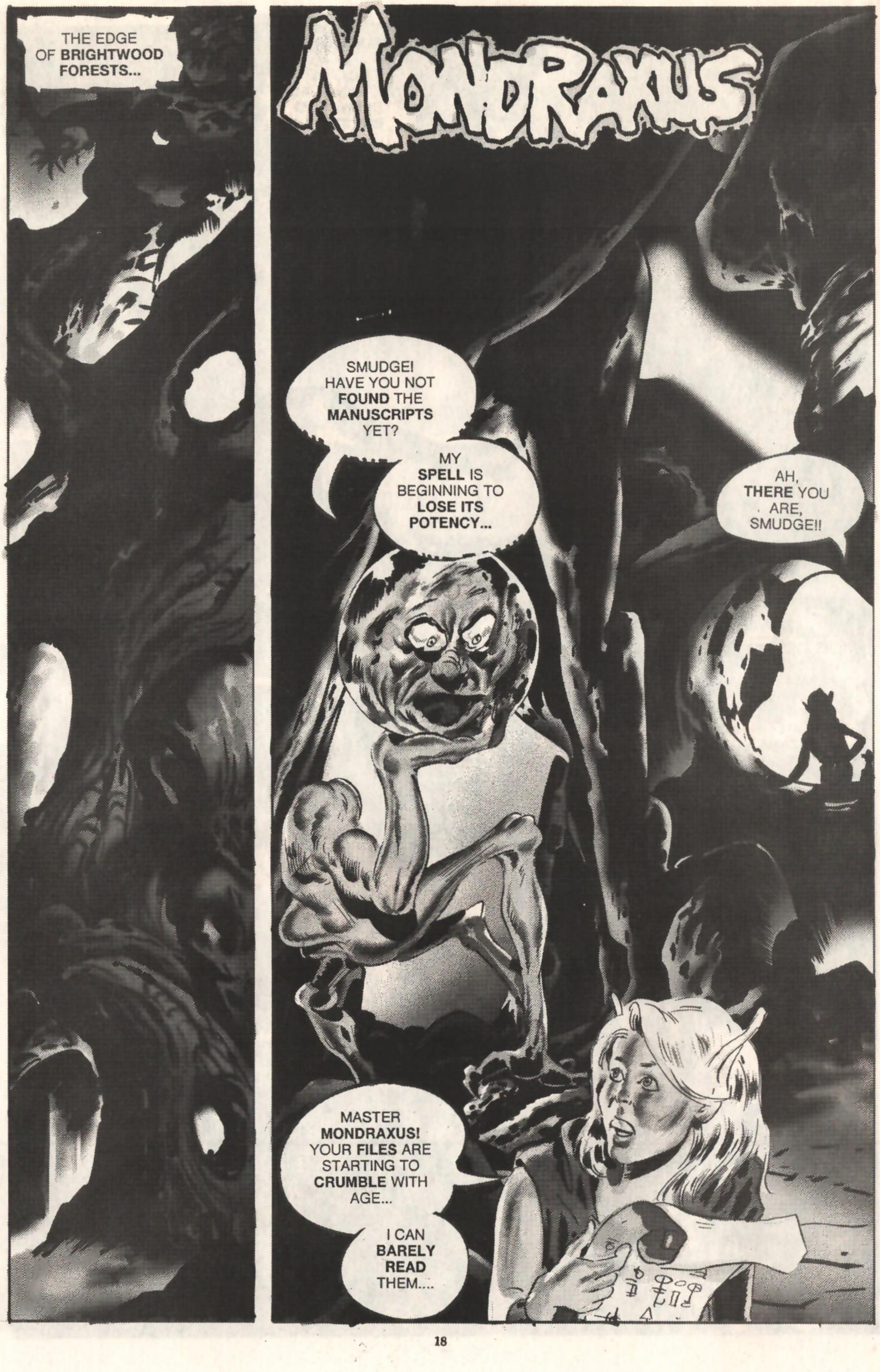

YOU MOCK ME!
HAD ANOTHER **TONGUE** UTTERED THOSE WORDS, I WOULD HAVE **CUT** IT OFF!
BUT.... THERE IS **SOME** TRUTH IN YOUR WORDS! ONLY THE **BLACKEST** OF SOULS WOULD SERVE US WELL....

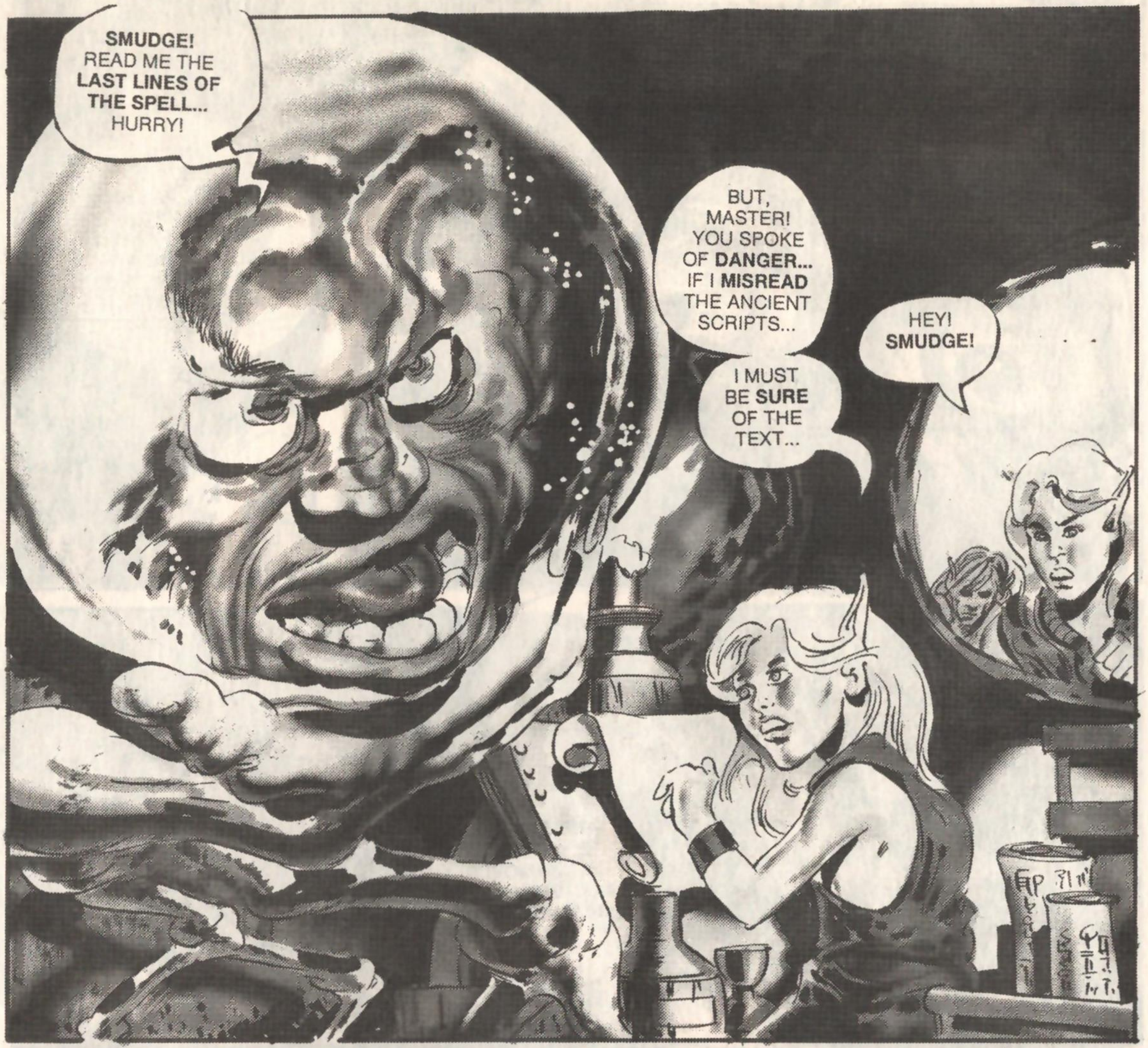

ONLY THOSE WHO HAVE ONCE SKIRTED THE HEIGHTS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS CAN PLUNGE SO DEEPLY INTO HELL! ONLY THEN IS THEIR DEPRAVITY BE SO COMPLETE, AND THEIR SHACKLES TO TABARROK SO UNBREAKABLE!

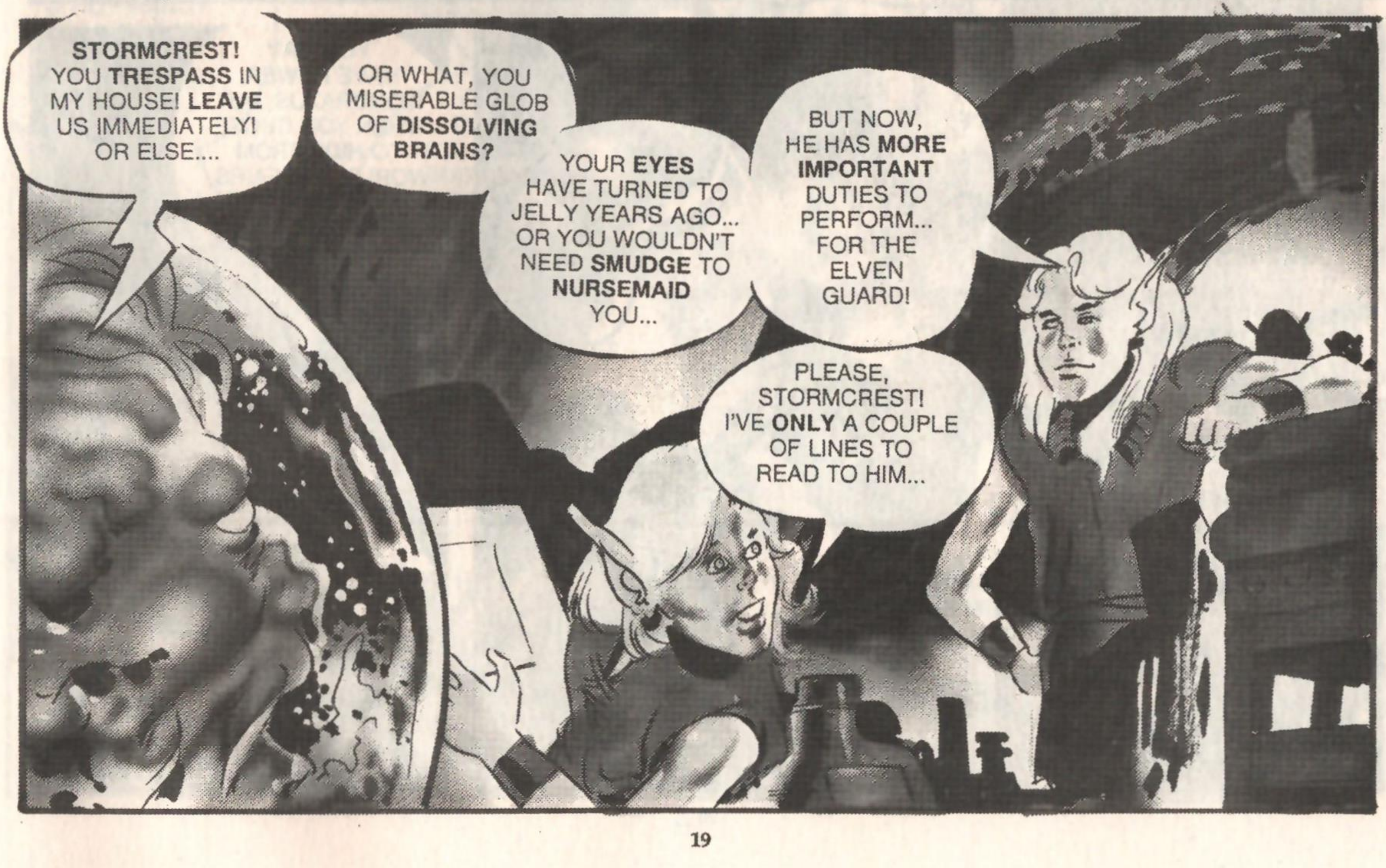

TO LEARN EVIL, YOU MUST KNOW GOOD!
WHAT BETTER PLACE OF LEARNING THAN THE **CORRUPTING PIT WE CALL URTH!**
BUT BE **WARNED,** GAUNTLET! YOUR **INNOCENCE** WILL NOT SHIELD YOU THIS TIME! THEY WILL **DESCEND** UPON YOU LIKE A CLOUD OF **GREY MASKS,** EACH BEARING INSTRUMENTS OF PAIN OR PLEASURE! IN CHOOSING, YOUR **EYES** WILL JAR OPEN TO **LIGHTNESS** AND **DARKNESS!** WHEN YOU FINALLY SEE... AND KNOW... **...I WILL COME FOR YOU!!**

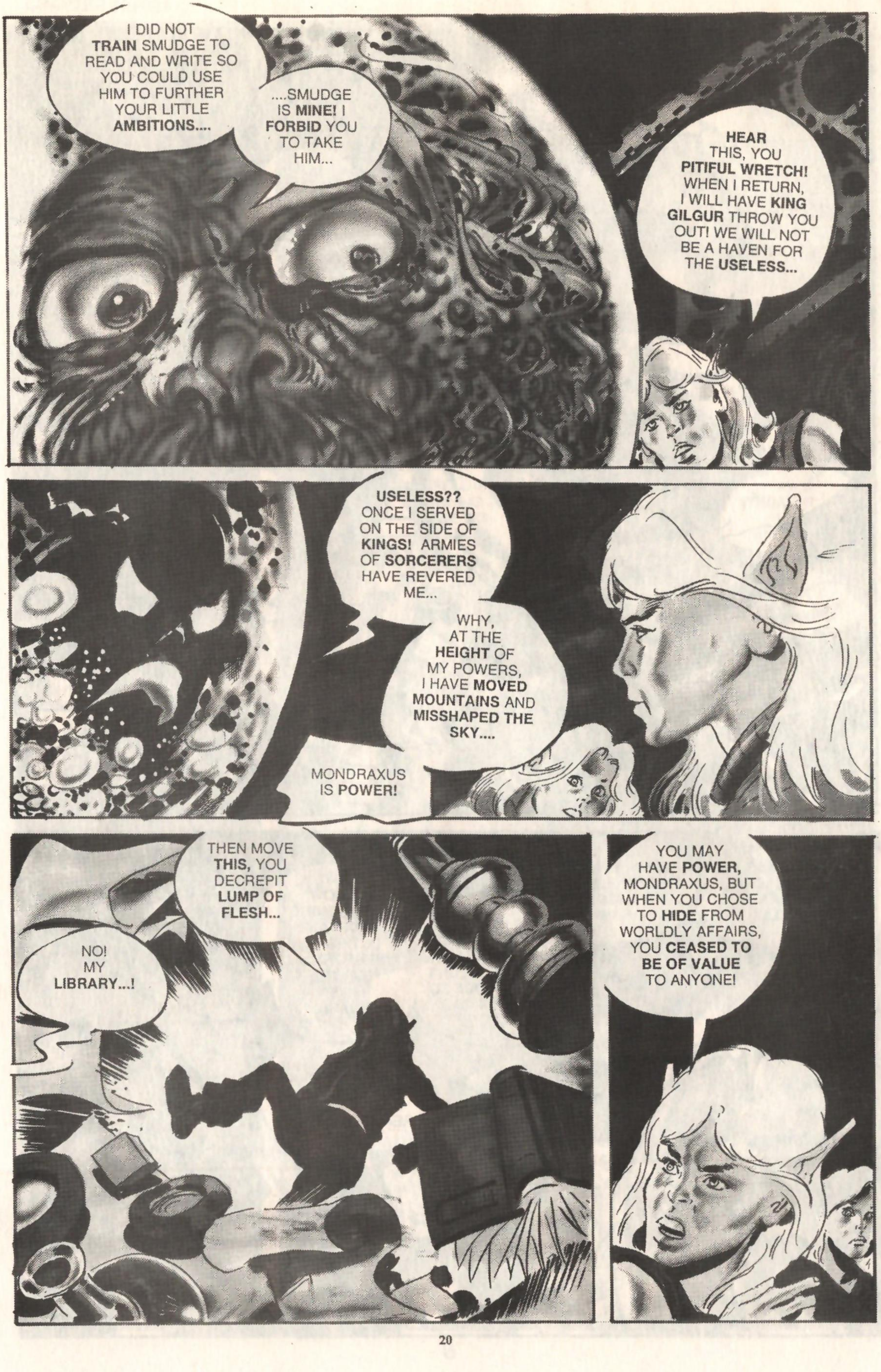

THAT WAS CLOSE! INCARNATUS THOUGHT THAT I WAS INCAPABLE OF DECEPTION! HE DID NOT KNOW THAT THE BATTLE-MASTER HAD TAUGHT ME WAR STRATEGY WELL WHEN I WAS A CHILD...
BUT HE WAS RIGHT! ALL I DID WAS TO BUY TIME...
...WHAT IS THIS? THE AREA... I SEEM TO KNOW IT... LIKE A MEMORY OF A DISTANT PAST....
...OF COURSE! I HAD SEEN THE CITY... THROUGH A BABY'S EYES... SO MANY YEARS AGO...
...THE CITY OF ALMIRA!
THE BATTLE-MASTER HAD TOLD ME OF MY BIRTHPLACE BEFORE HE DIED....
...WHERE I WILL FIND MY OWN KIND... MY RIGHTFUL INHERITANCE...
...MY DESTINY!!

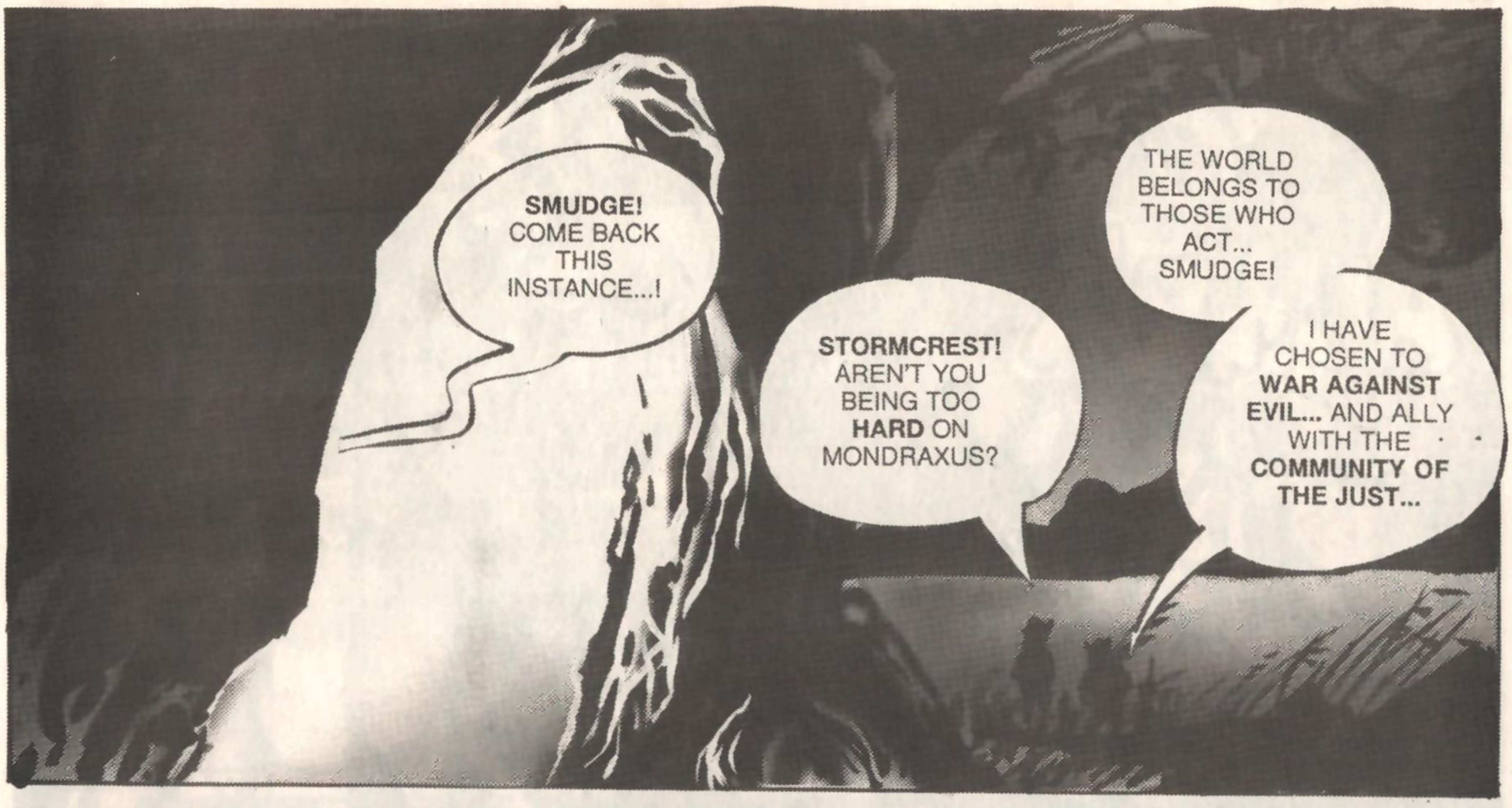
CHAPTER THREE

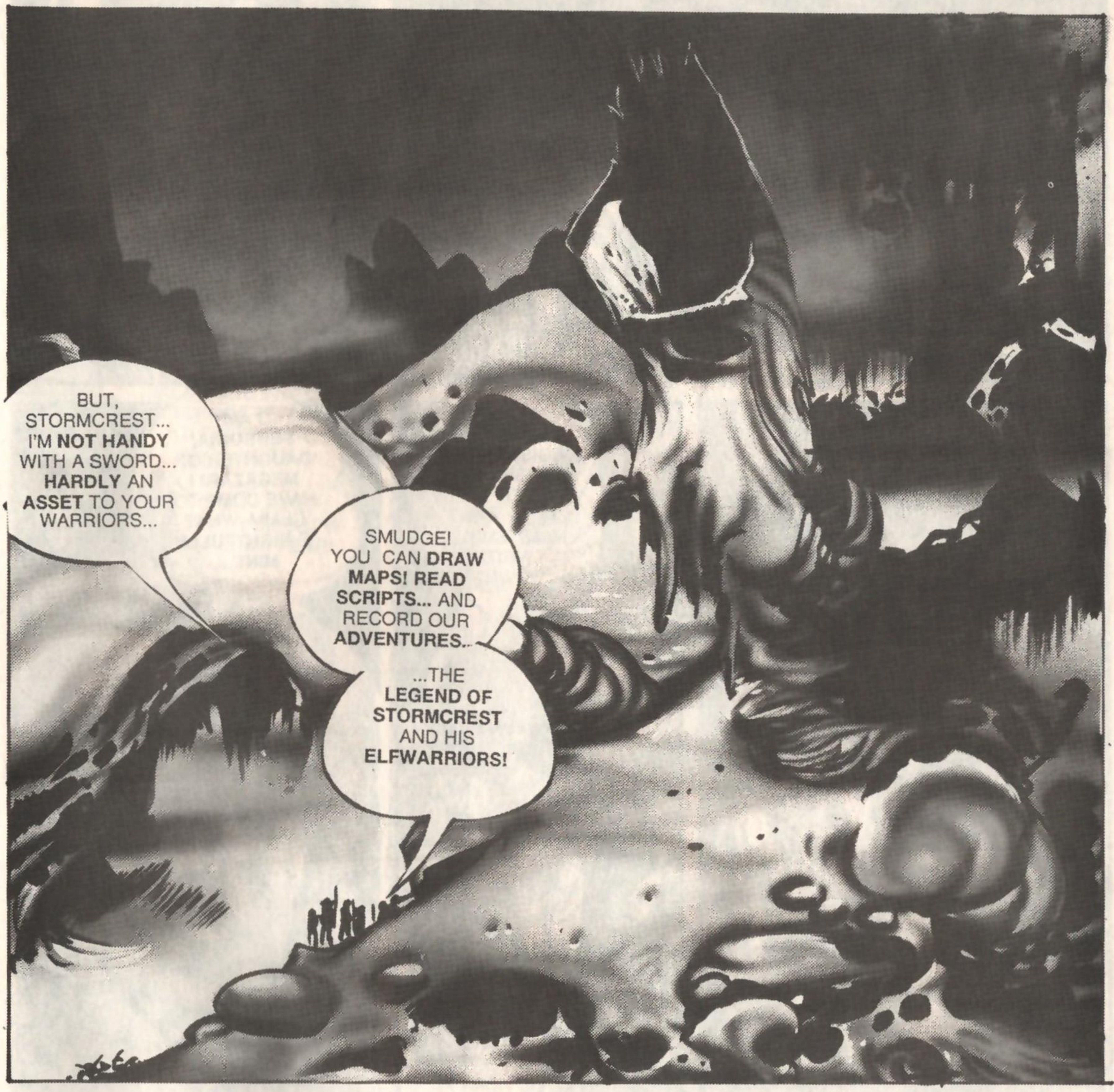

THE EDGE OF BRIGHTWOOD FORESTS...
MONDRAXUS
SMUDGE! HAVE YOU NOT FOUND THE MANUSCRIPTS YET?
MY SPELL IS BEGINNING TO LOSE ITS POTENCY...
AH, THERE YOU ARE, SMUDGE!!
MASTER MONDRAXUS! YOUR FILES ARE STARTING TO CRUMBLE WITH AGE...
I CAN BARELY READ THEM....


SMUDGE! READ ME THE **LAST LINES OF THE SPELL...** HURRY!
BUT, MASTER! YOU SPOKE OF **DANGER...** IF I **MISREAD** THE ANCIENT SCRIPTS...
I MUST BE **SURE** OF THE TEXT...
HEY! **SMUDGE!**

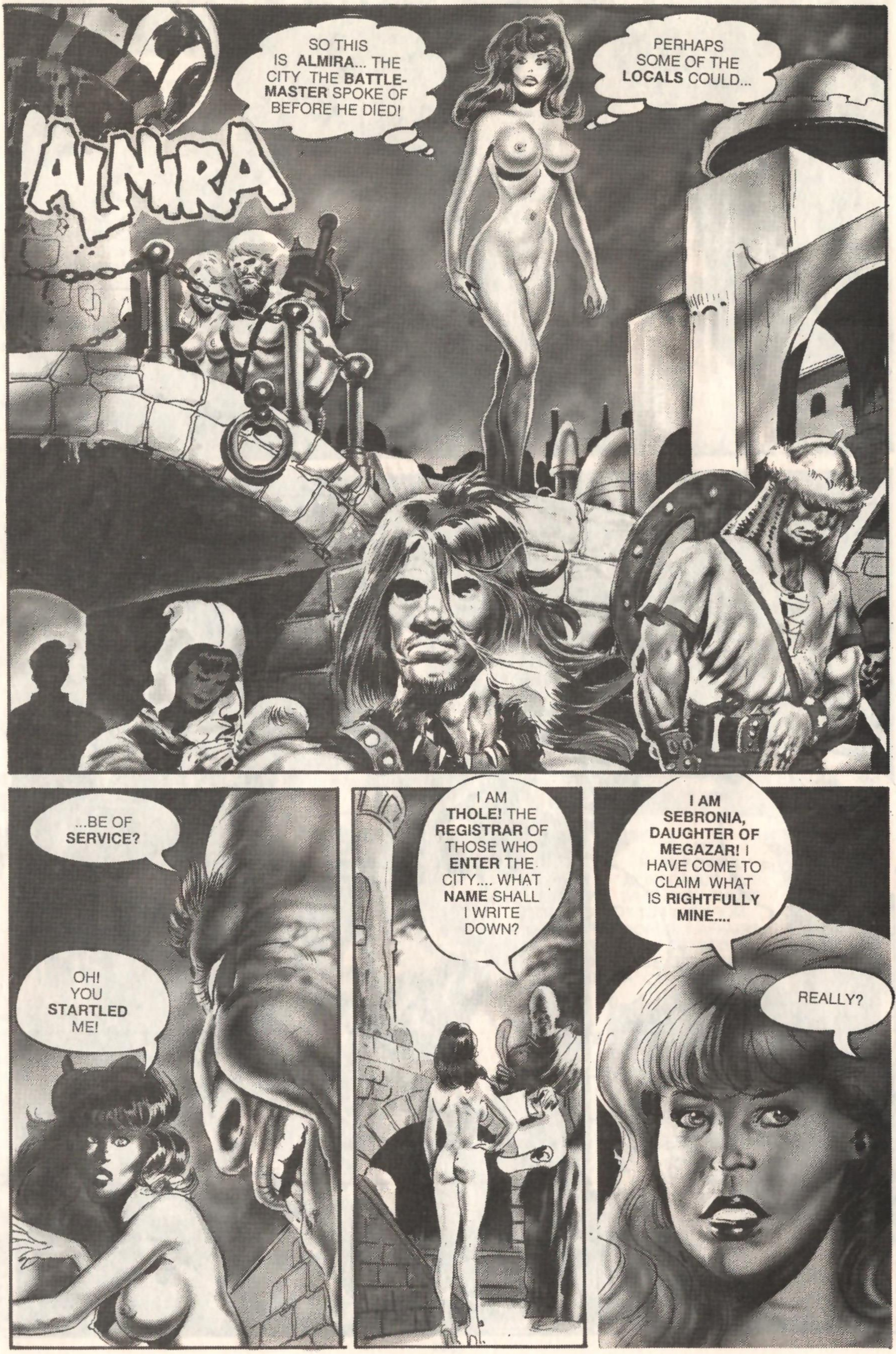

STORMCREST! YOU **TRESPASS** IN MY HOUSE! **LEAVE** US IMMEDIATELY! OR ELSE....
OR WHAT, YOU MISERABLE GLOB OF **DISSOLVING BRAINS?**
YOUR **EYES** HAVE TURNED TO JELLY YEARS AGO... OR YOU WOULDN'T NEED **SMUDGE** TO **NURSEMAID** YOU...
BUT NOW, HE HAS **MORE IMPORTANT** DUTIES TO PERFORM... FOR THE ELVEN GUARD!
PLEASE, STORMCREST! I'VE **ONLY** A COUPLE OF LINES TO READ TO HIM...

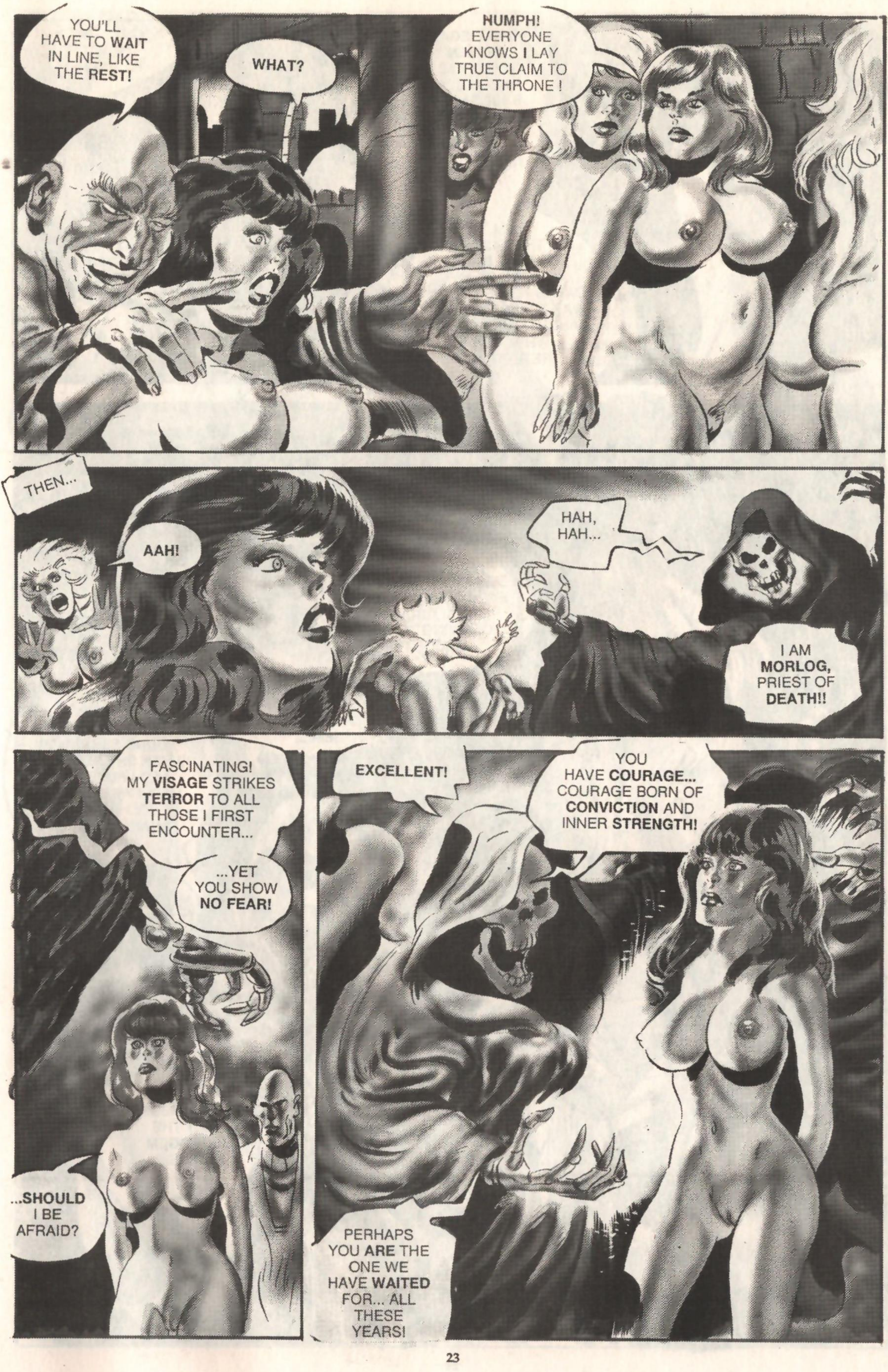

I DID NOT **TRAIN** SMUDGE TO READ AND WRITE SO YOU COULD USE HIM TO FURTHER YOUR LITTLE **AMBITIONS....**
....SMUDGE IS **MINE!** I **FORBID** YOU TO TAKE HIM...
HEAR THIS, YOU **PITIFUL WRETCH!** WHEN I RETURN, I WILL HAVE **KING GILGUR** THROW YOU OUT! WE WILL NOT BE A HAVEN FOR THE **USELESS...**
USELESS?? ONCE I SERVED ON THE SIDE OF **KINGS!** ARMIES OF **SORCERERS** HAVE REVERED ME...
WHY, AT THE **HEIGHT** OF MY POWERS, I HAVE **MOVED MOUNTAINS** AND **MISSHAPED THE SKY....**
MONDRAXUS IS **POWER!**
THEN MOVE **THIS,** YOU DECREPIT **LUMP OF FLESH...**
NO! MY **LIBRARY...!**
YOU MAY HAVE **POWER,** MONDRAXUS, BUT WHEN YOU CHOSE TO **HIDE** FROM WORLDLY AFFAIRS, YOU **CEASED TO BE OF VALUE** TO ANYONE!

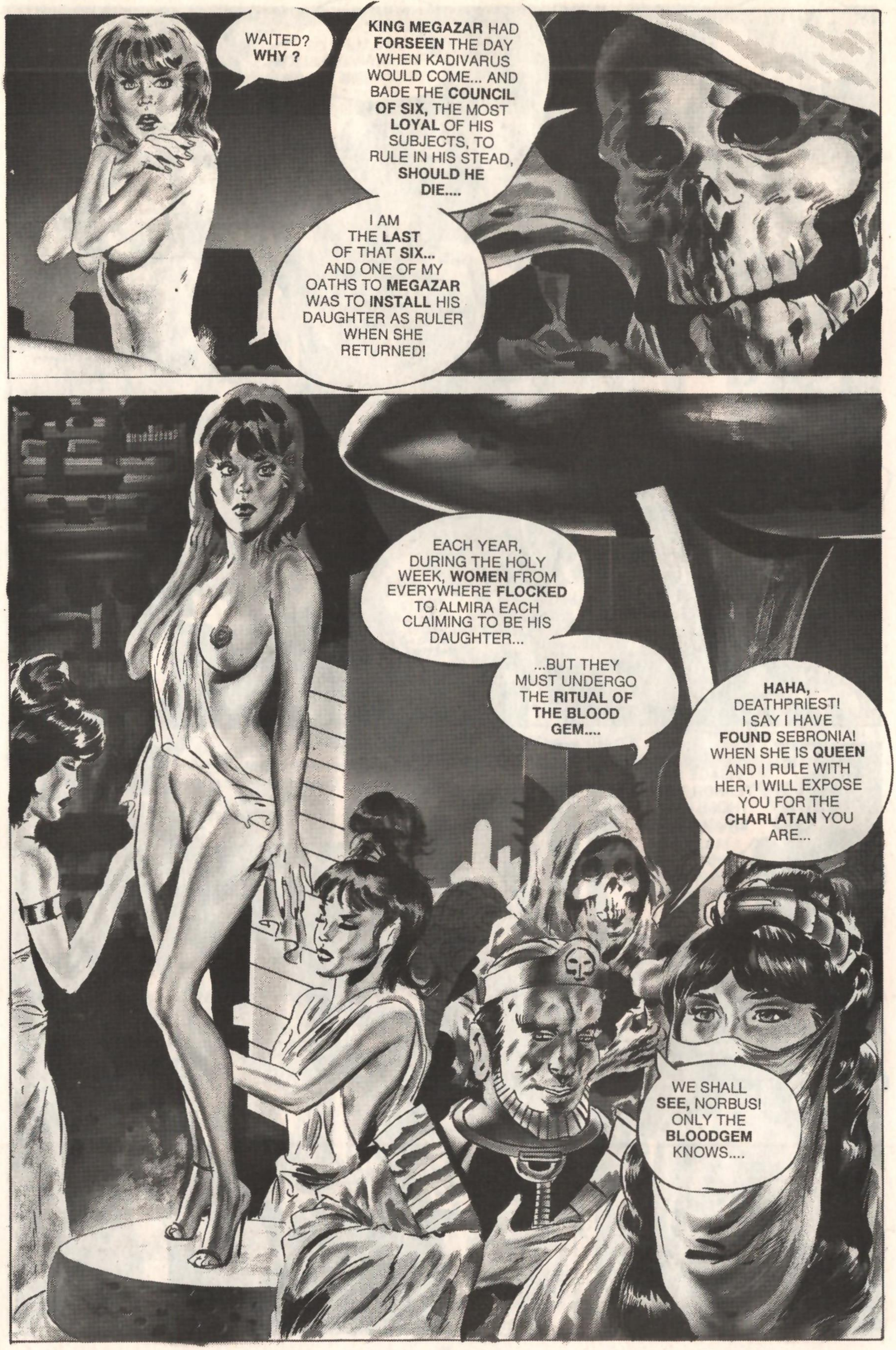

SMUDGE! COME BACK THIS INSTANCE...!
STORMCREST! AREN'T YOU BEING TOO **HARD** ON MONDRAXUS?
THE WORLD BELONGS TO THOSE WHO ACT... SMUDGE!
I HAVE CHOSEN TO **WAR AGAINST EVIL...** AND ALLY WITH THE **COMMUNITY OF THE JUST...**

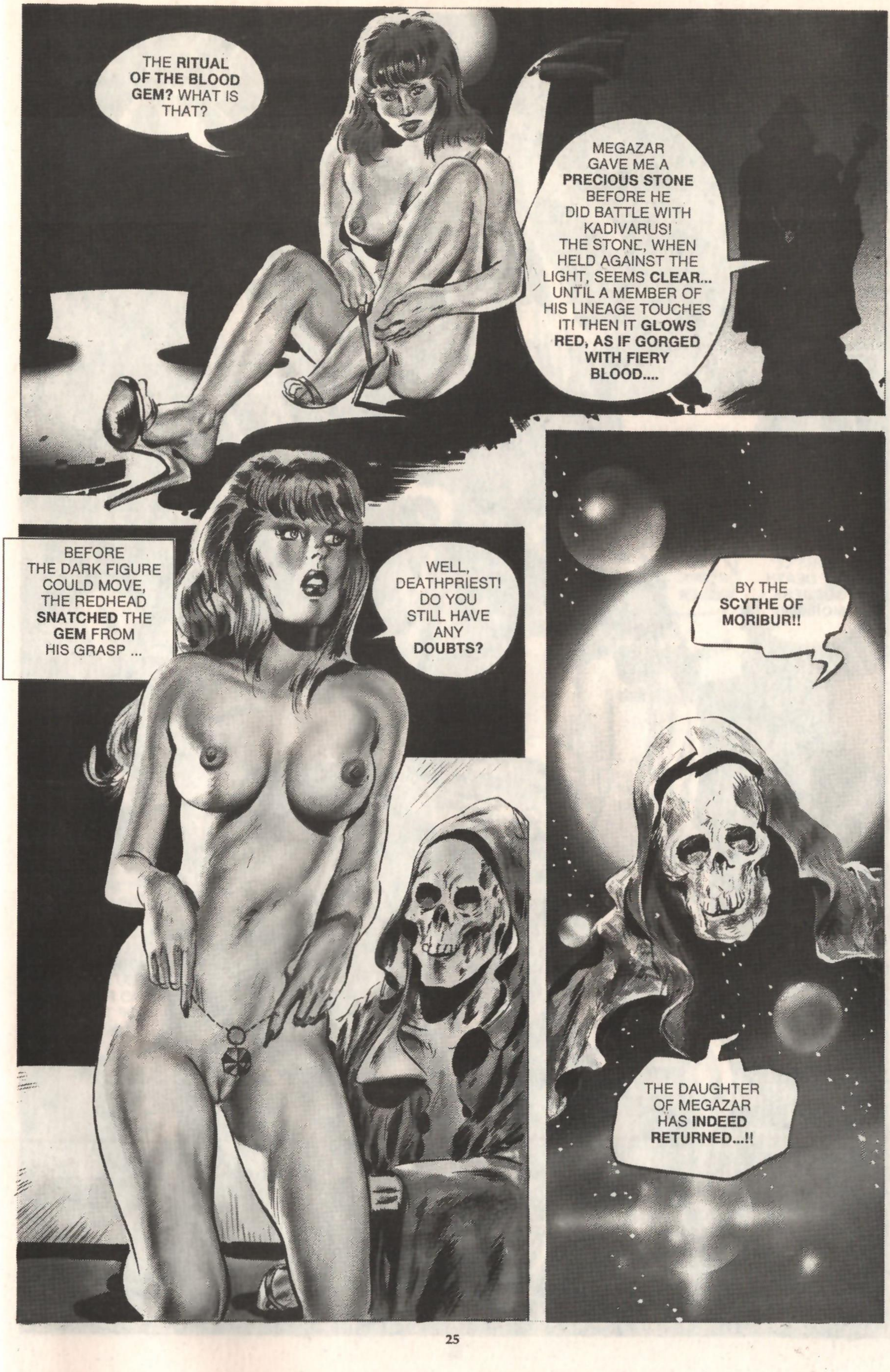

BUT, STORMCREST... I'M **NOT HANDY** WITH A SWORD... **HARDLY** AN **ASSET** TO YOUR WARRIORS...
SMUDGE! YOU CAN **DRAW MAPS! READ SCRIPTS...** AND RECORD OUR **ADVENTURES...**
...THE **LEGEND OF STORMCREST** AND HIS **ELFWARRIORS!**

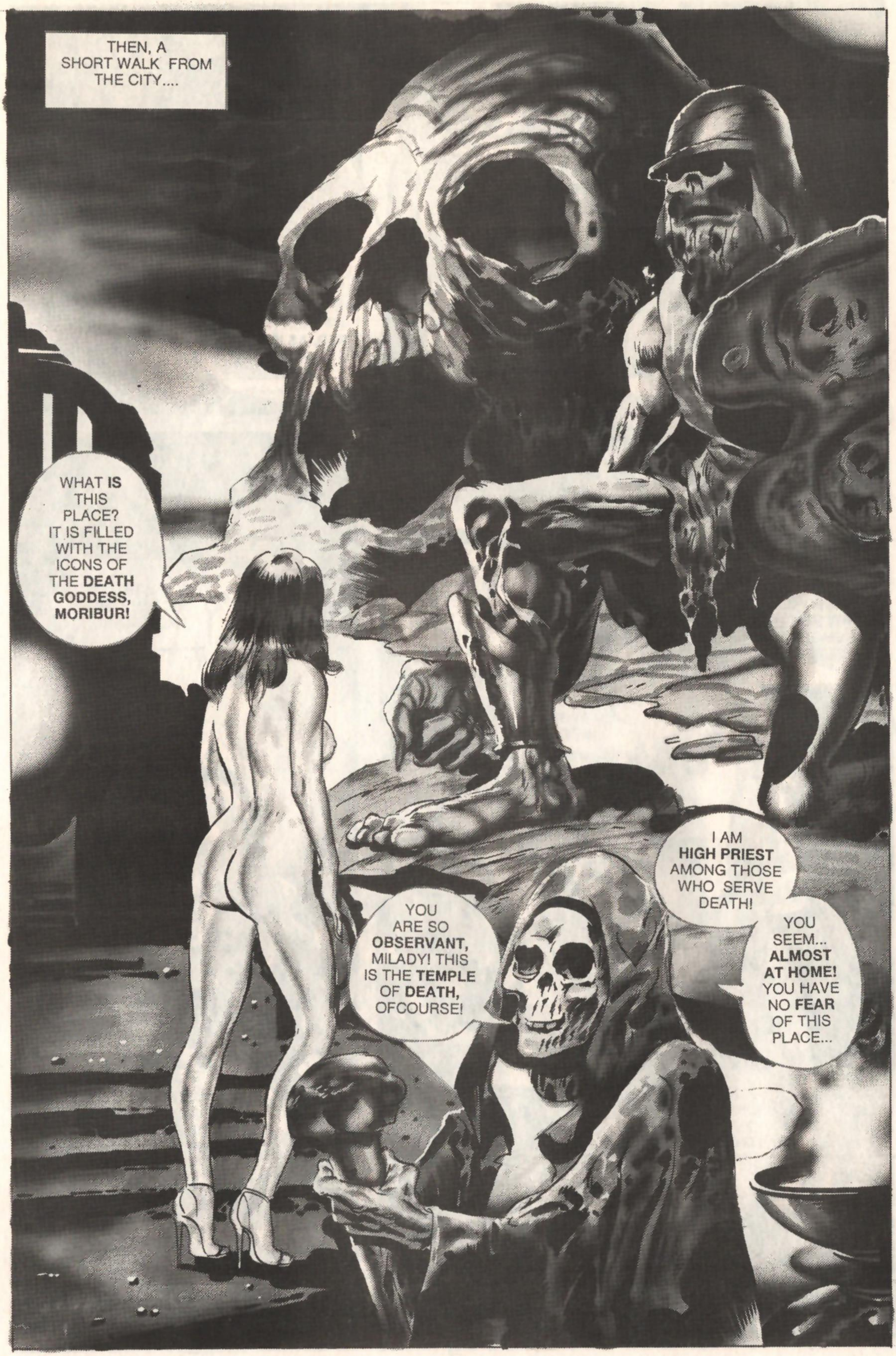
CHAPTER FOUR

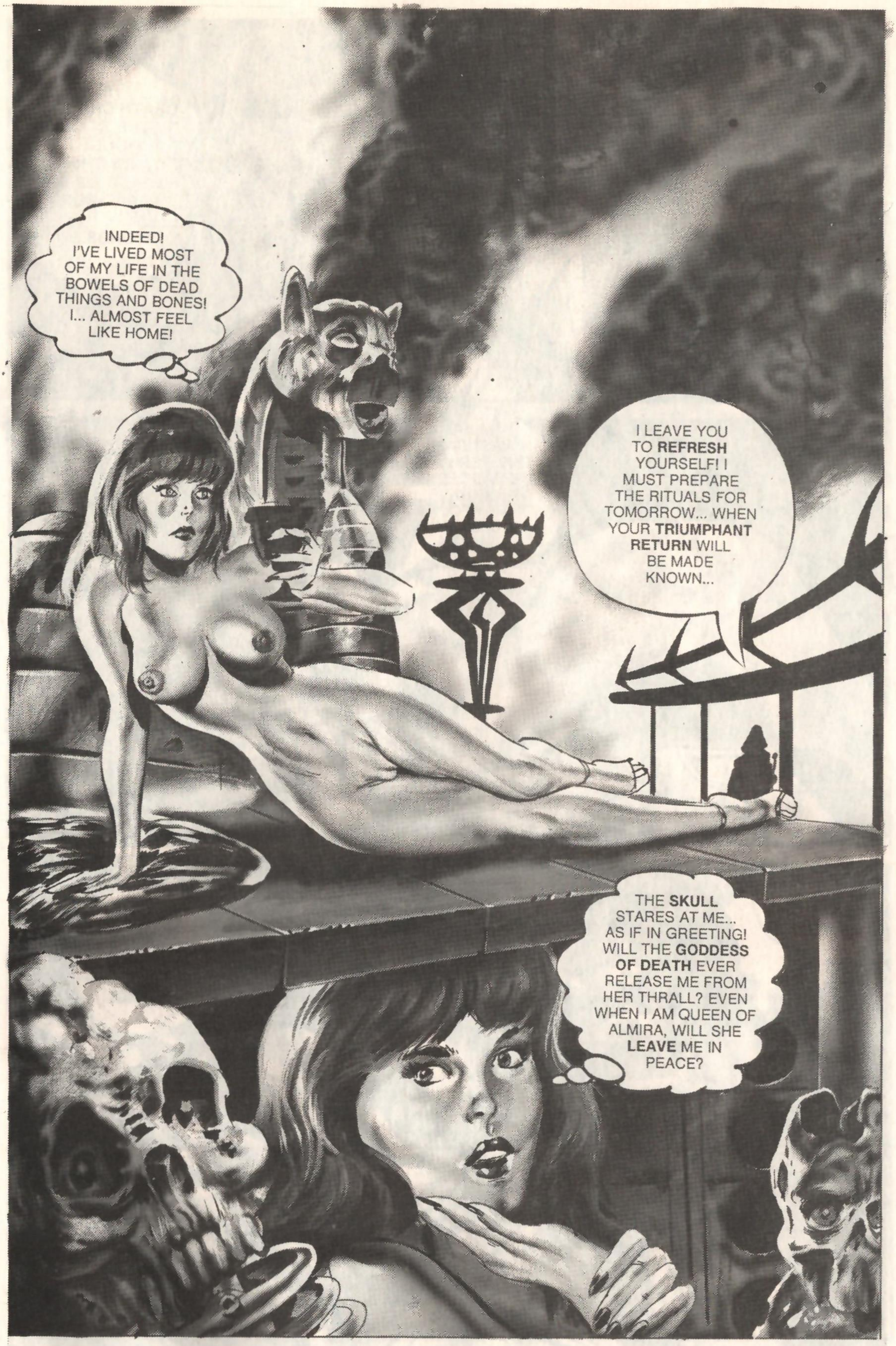

SO THIS IS **ALMIRA**... THE CITY THE **BATTLE-MASTER** SPOKE OF BEFORE HE DIED!
PERHAPS SOME OF THE **LOCALS** COULD...
ALMIRA
...BE OF **SERVICE?**
OH! YOU **STARTLED** ME!
I AM **THOLE!** THE **REGISTRAR** OF THOSE WHO **ENTER** THE CITY.... WHAT **NAME** SHALL I WRITE DOWN?
I AM SEBRONIA, DAUGHTER OF MEGAZAR! I HAVE COME TO CLAIM WHAT IS **RIGHTFULLY MINE....**
REALLY?

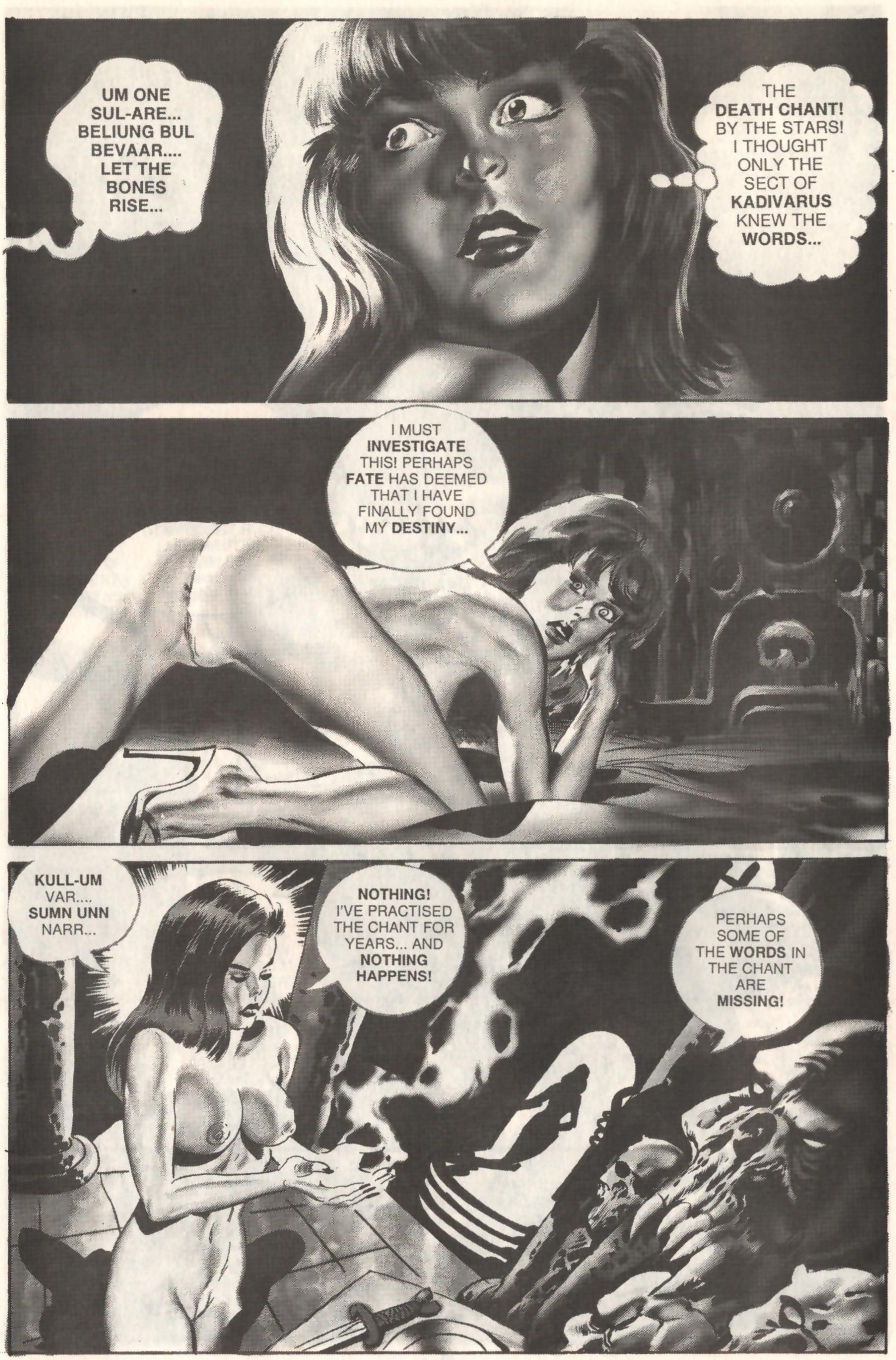

YOU'LL HAVE TO **WAIT** IN LINE, LIKE THE **REST!**
WHAT?
NUMPH! EVERYONE KNOWS **I** LAY TRUE CLAIM TO THE THRONE !
THEN...
AAH!
HAH, HAH...
I AM **MORLOG,** PRIEST OF **DEATH!!**
FASCINATING! MY **VISAGE** STRIKES **TERROR** TO ALL THOSE I FIRST ENCOUNTER...
...YET YOU SHOW **NO FEAR!**
...SHOULD I BE AFRAID?
EXCELLENT!
YOU HAVE **COURAGE...** COURAGE BORN OF **CONVICTION** AND INNER **STRENGTH!**
PERHAPS YOU **ARE** THE ONE WE HAVE **WAITED** FOR... ALL THESE YEARS!

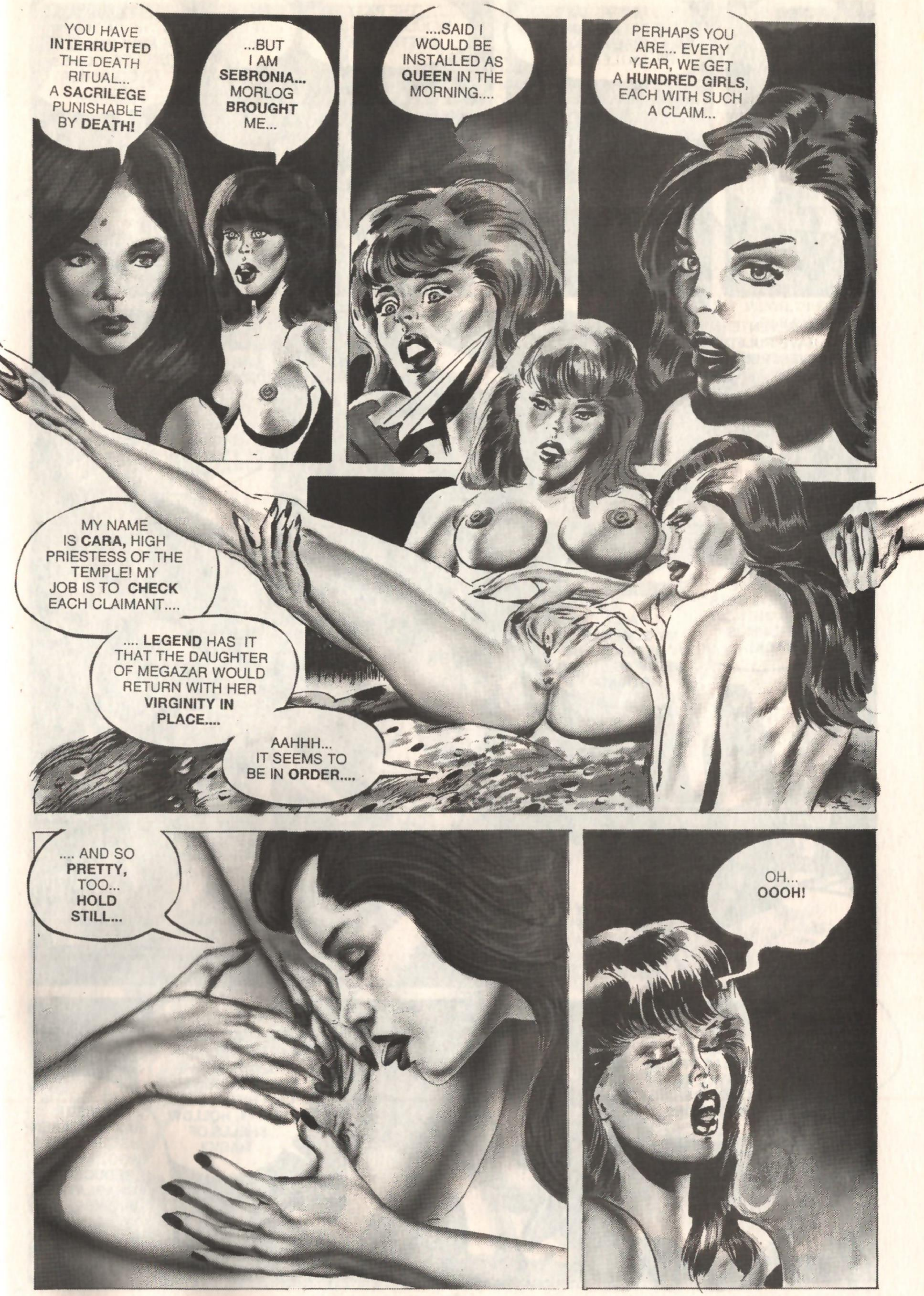

WAITED? WHY ?
KING MEGAZAR HAD FORSEEN THE DAY WHEN KADIVARUS WOULD COME... AND BADE THE COUNCIL OF SIX, THE MOST LOYAL OF HIS SUBJECTS, TO RULE IN HIS STEAD, SHOULD HE DIE....
I AM THE LAST OF THAT SIX... AND ONE OF MY OATHS TO MEGAZAR WAS TO INSTALL HIS DAUGHTER AS RULER WHEN SHE RETURNED!
EACH YEAR, DURING THE HOLY WEEK, WOMEN FROM EVERYWHERE FLOCKED TO ALMIRA EACH CLAIMING TO BE HIS DAUGHTER...
...BUT THEY MUST UNDERGO THE RITUAL OF THE BLOOD GEM....
HAHA, DEATHPRIEST! I SAY I HAVE FOUND SEBRONIA! WHEN SHE IS QUEEN AND I RULE WITH HER, I WILL EXPOSE YOU FOR THE CHARLATAN YOU ARE...
WE SHALL SEE, NORBUS! ONLY THE BLOODGEM KNOWS....

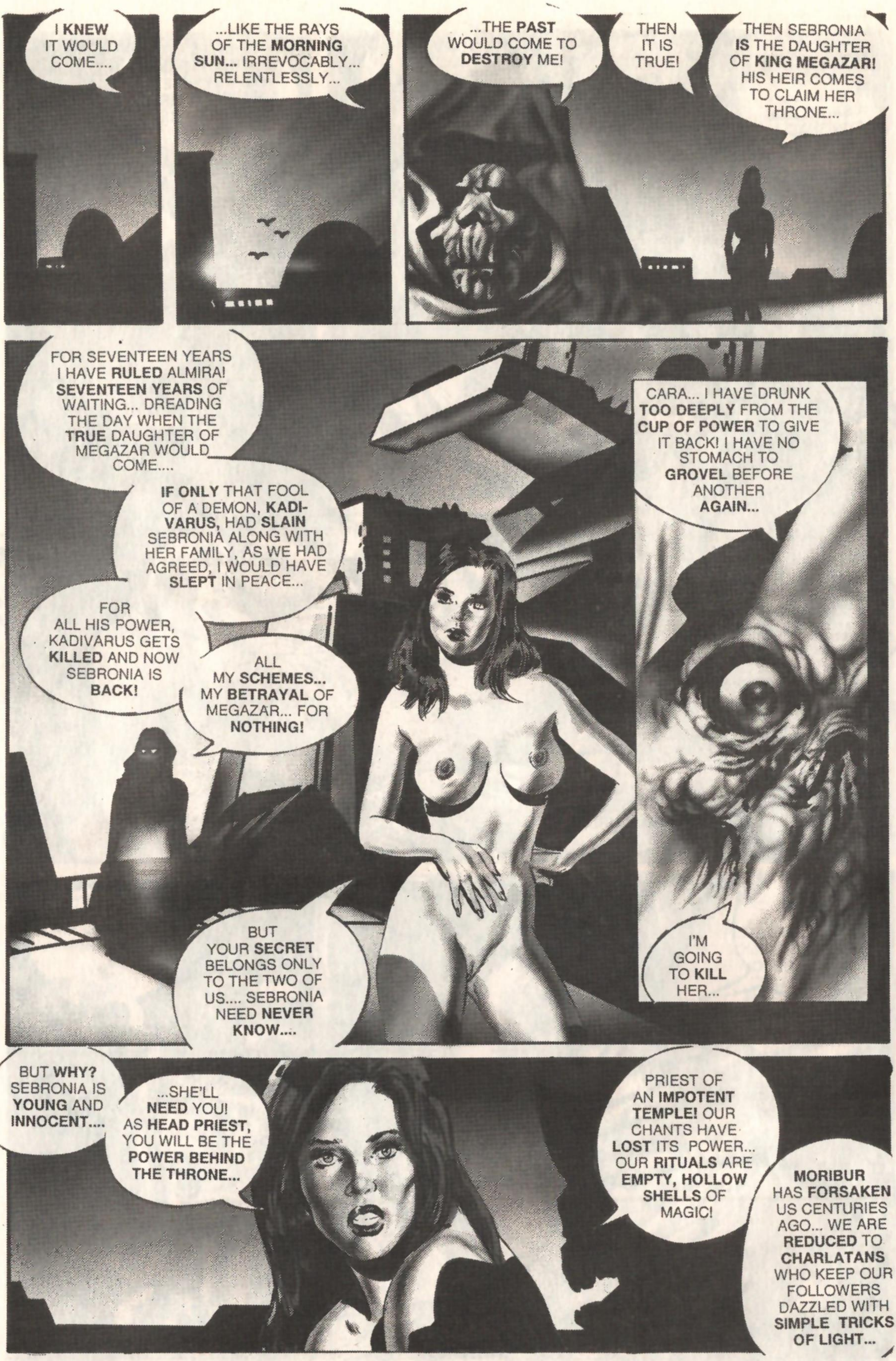

THE RITUAL OF THE BLOOD GEM? WHAT IS THAT?
MEGAZAR GAVE ME A PRECIOUS STONE BEFORE HE DID BATTLE WITH KADIVARUS! THE STONE, WHEN HELD AGAINST THE LIGHT, SEEMS CLEAR... UNTIL A MEMBER OF HIS LINEAGE TOUCHES IT! THEN IT GLOWS RED, AS IF GORGED WITH FIERY BLOOD....
BEFORE THE DARK FIGURE COULD MOVE, THE REDHEAD SNATCHED THE GEM FROM HIS GRASP ...
WELL, DEATHPRIEST! DO YOU STILL HAVE ANY DOUBTS?
BY THE SCYTHE OF MORIBUR!!
THE DAUGHTER OF MEGAZAR HAS INDEED RETURNED...!!

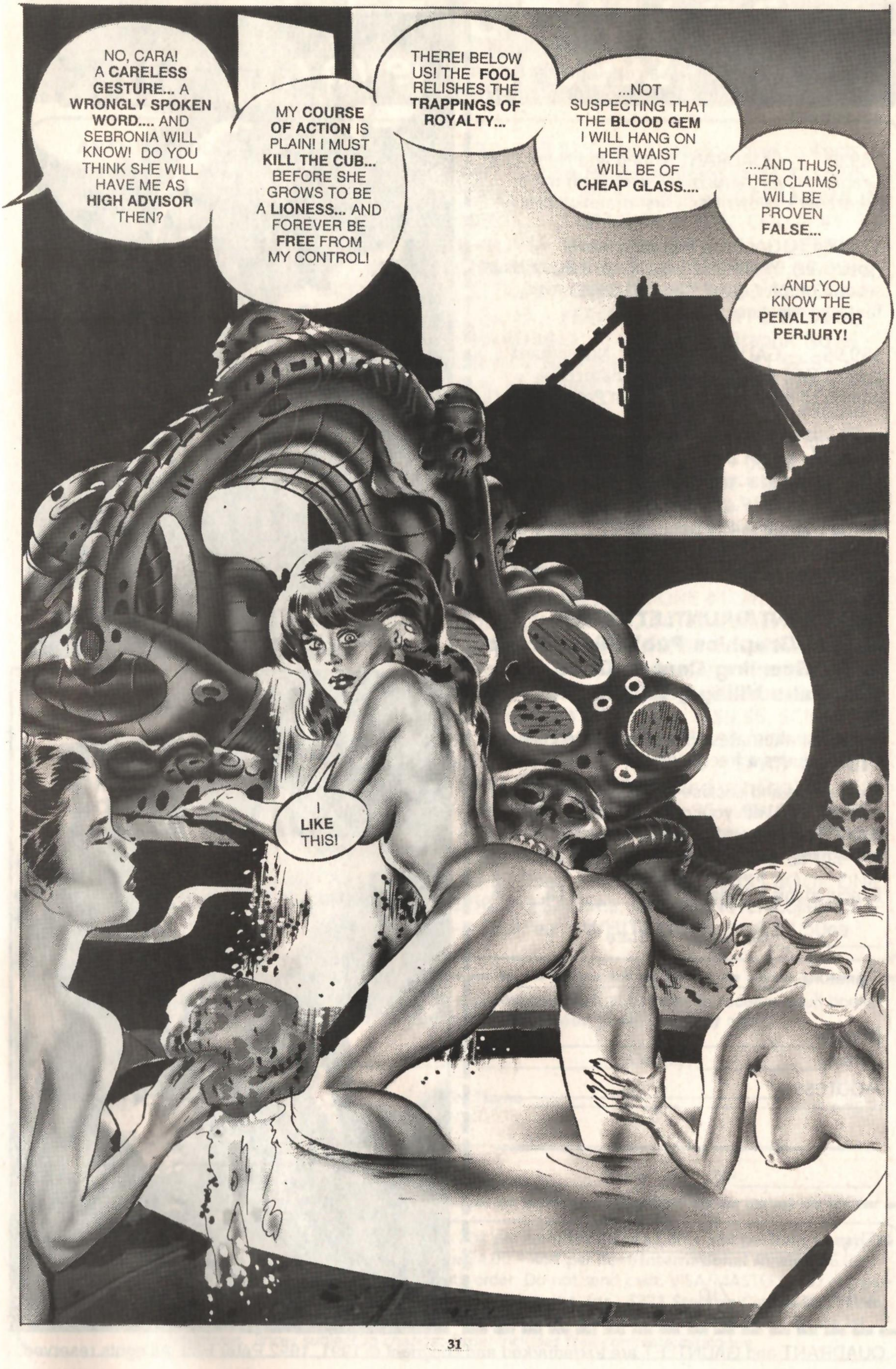

THEN, A SHORT WALK FROM THE CITY....
WHAT **IS** THIS PLACE? IT IS FILLED WITH THE ICONS OF THE **DEATH GODDESS, MORIBUR!**
YOU ARE SO **OBSERVANT,** MILADY! THIS IS THE **TEMPLE** OF **DEATH,** OFCOURSE!
I AM **HIGH PRIEST** AMONG THOSE WHO SERVE DEATH!
YOU SEEM... **ALMOST AT HOME!** YOU HAVE NO **FEAR** OF THIS PLACE...


INDEED! I'VE LIVED MOST OF MY LIFE IN THE BOWELS OF DEAD THINGS AND BONES! I... ALMOST FEEL LIKE HOME!
I LEAVE YOU TO **REFRESH** YOURSELF! I MUST PREPARE THE RITUALS FOR TOMORROW... WHEN YOUR **TRIUMPHANT RETURN** WILL BE MADE KNOWN...
THE **SKULL** STARES AT ME... AS IF IN GREETING! WILL THE **GODDESS OF DEATH** EVER RELEASE ME FROM HER THRALL? EVEN WHEN I AM QUEEN OF ALMIRA, WILL SHE **LEAVE** ME IN PEACE?


UM ONE SUL-ARE... BELIUNG BUL BEVAAR.... LET THE BONES RISE...
THE DEATH CHANT! BY THE STARS! I THOUGHT ONLY THE SECT OF KADIVARUS KNEW THE WORDS...
I MUST INVESTIGATE THIS! PERHAPS FATE HAS DEEMED THAT I HAVE FINALLY FOUND MY DESTINY...
KULL-UM VAR.... SUMN UNN NARR...
NOTHING! I'VE PRACTISED THE CHANT FOR YEARS... AND NOTHING HAPPENS!
PERHAPS SOME OF THE WORDS IN THE CHANT ARE MISSING!


YOU HAVE **INTERRUPTED** THE DEATH RITUAL... A **SACRILEGE** PUNISHABLE BY **DEATH!**
...BUT I AM **SEBRONIA...** MORLOG **BROUGHT** ME...
....SAID I WOULD BE INSTALLED AS **QUEEN** IN THE MORNING....
PERHAPS YOU ARE... EVERY YEAR, WE GET A **HUNDRED GIRLS,** EACH WITH SUCH A CLAIM...
MY NAME IS **CARA,** HIGH PRIESTESS OF THE TEMPLE! MY JOB IS TO **CHECK** EACH CLAIMANT....
.... **LEGEND** HAS IT THAT THE DAUGHTER OF MEGAZAR WOULD RETURN WITH HER **VIRGINITY IN PLACE....**
AAHHH... IT SEEMS TO BE IN **ORDER....**
.... AND SO **PRETTY,** TOO... **HOLD STILL...**
OH... **OOOH!**


I KNEW IT WOULD COME....
...LIKE THE RAYS OF THE MORNING SUN... IRREVOCABLY... RELENTLESSLY...
...THE PAST WOULD COME TO DESTROY ME!
THEN IT IS TRUE!
THEN SEBRONIA IS THE DAUGHTER OF KING MEGAZAR! HIS HEIR COMES TO CLAIM HER THRONE...
FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS I HAVE RULED ALMIRA! SEVENTEEN YEARS OF WAITING... DREADING THE DAY WHEN THE TRUE DAUGHTER OF MEGAZAR WOULD COME....
IF ONLY THAT FOOL OF A DEMON, KADIVARUS, HAD SLAIN SEBRONIA ALONG WITH HER FAMILY, AS WE HAD AGREED, I WOULD HAVE SLEPT IN PEACE...
FOR ALL HIS POWER, KADIVARUS GETS KILLED AND NOW SEBRONIA IS BACK!
ALL MY SCHEMES... MY BETRAYAL OF MEGAZAR... FOR NOTHING!
BUT YOUR SECRET BELONGS ONLY TO THE TWO OF US.... SEBRONIA NEED NEVER KNOW....
CARA... I HAVE DRUNK TOO DEEPLY FROM THE CUP OF POWER TO GIVE IT BACK! I HAVE NO STOMACH TO GROVEL BEFORE ANOTHER AGAIN...
I'M GOING TO KILL HER...
BUT WHY? SEBRONIA IS YOUNG AND INNOCENT....
...SHE'LL NEED YOU! AS HEAD PRIEST, YOU WILL BE THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE...
PRIEST OF AN IMPOTENT TEMPLE! OUR CHANTS HAVE LOST ITS POWER... OUR RITUALS ARE EMPTY, HOLLOW SHELLS OF MAGIC!
MORIBUR HAS FORSAKEN US CENTURIES AGO... WE ARE REDUCED TO CHARLATANS WHO KEEP OUR FOLLOWERS DAZZLED WITH SIMPLE TRICKS OF LIGHT...


NO, CARA! A CARELESS GESTURE... A WRONGLY SPOKEN WORD.... AND SEBRONIA WILL KNOW! DO YOU THINK SHE WILL HAVE ME AS HIGH ADVISOR THEN?
MY COURSE OF ACTION IS PLAIN! I MUST KILL THE CUB... BEFORE SHE GROWS TO BE A LIONESS... AND FOREVER BE FREE FROM MY CONTROL!
THERE! BELOW US! THE FOOL RELISHES THE TRAPPINGS OF ROYALTY...
...NOT SUSPECTING THAT THE BLOOD GEM I WILL HANG ON HER WAIST WILL BE OF CHEAP GLASS....
....AND THUS, HER CLAIMS WILL BE PROVEN FALSE...
...AND YOU KNOW THE PENALTY FOR PERJURY!
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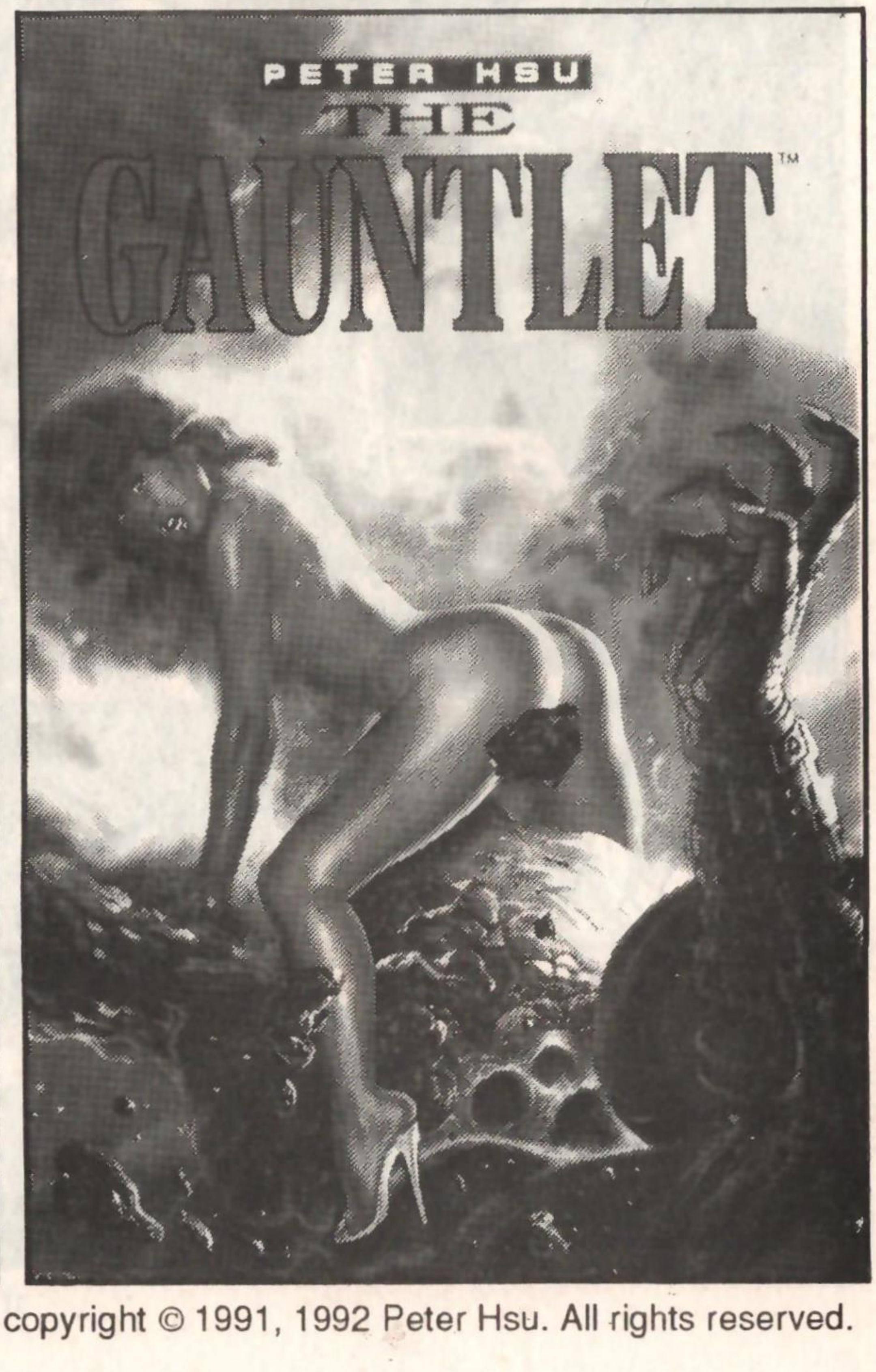

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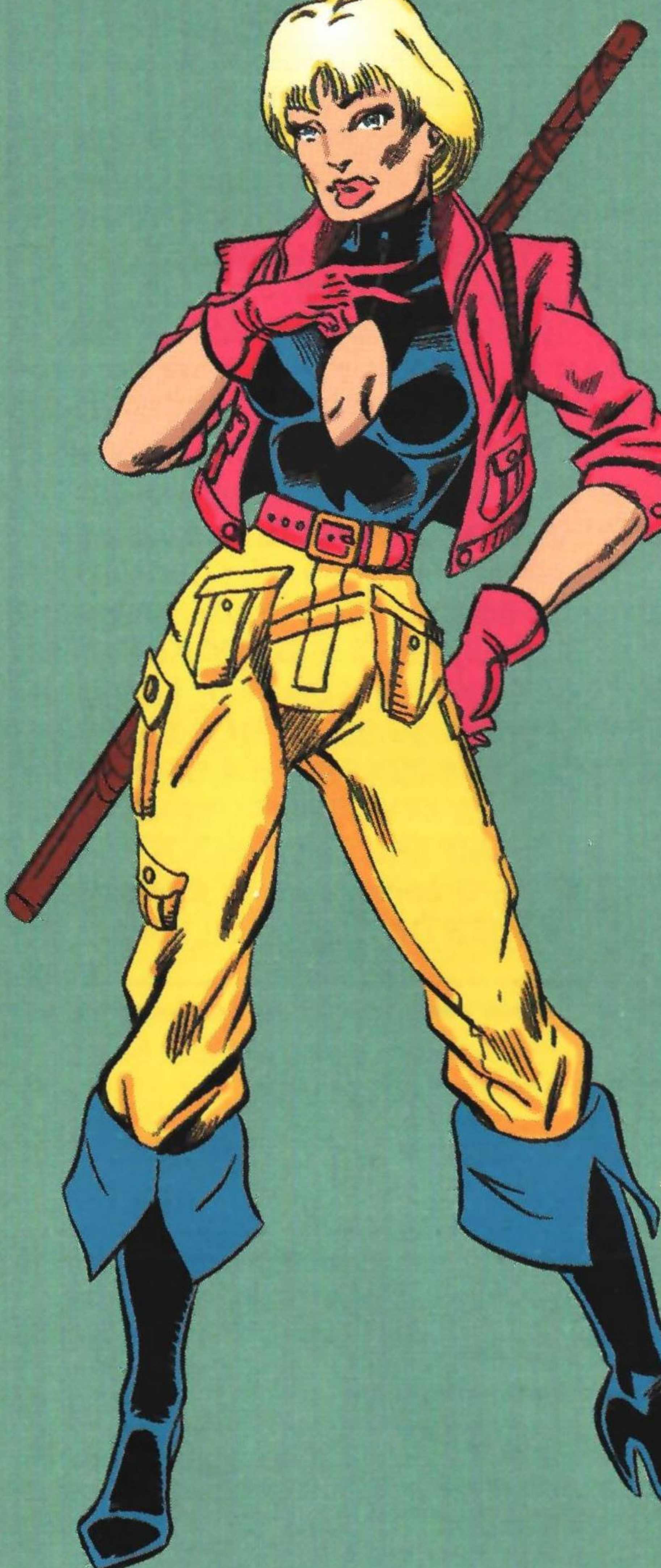

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